

## Direct democracy may be key to a happier American democracy

Written by The Conversation USA

---

Is American democracy still “by the people, for the people?”

According to recent [research](#), it may not be. Martin Gilens at Princeton University confirms that the wishes of the American working and middle class play essentially no role in our nation’s policy making. A BBC story rightly summarized this with the headline:

[US Is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy.](#)

However [new research](#) by Benjamin Radcliff and Gregory Shufeldt suggests a ray of hope.

Ballot initiatives, they argue, may better serve the interests of ordinary Americans than laws passed by elected officials.

### Busy ballot initiative year

Today, 24 states allow citizens to directly vote on policy matters.

This year, more than 42 initiatives already are approved for the ballot in 18 states.

Voters in California will decide diverse questions including banning [plastic](#) bags, voter approval of state expenses greater than US\$2 billion dollars, improving school funding, and the future of [bilingual education](#).

The people of Colorado will vote on replacing their current medical insurance programs with a [single payer system](#), and in Massachusetts people may consider legalizing [recreational marijuana](#).

### ‘By the people’ – or not so much?

## Direct democracy may be key to a happier American democracy

Written by The Conversation USA

---

Our founders would have been ambivalent about so much direct democracy.

Although the country was founded on the notion that people are happier when they have a say in government, the founders were not optimistic about the ability of people to govern themselves too directly. James Madison, the “father” of the Constitution, [famously argued](#)

the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.

By the late nineteenth century, [average Americans felt excluded](#) from a representative system they saw as becoming a plutocracy. Much like today, Americans then saw government controlled by the rich and corporate. This gave rise to the Populist Era in which citizens demanded government be more responsive to their needs. Most Populist Era reforms were expansions of direct democracy.

[Examples include](#)

the popular election of Senators, a primary system for picking party candidates, and woman’s suffrage.

South Dakota adopted a system of “initiative, referendum, and recall” in [1898](#) . Oregon and California quickly followed, and the system was adopted by another dozen [states](#) in under 10 years.

It’s been a slow build ever since. Most recently, Mississippi gave citizens the initiative in 1992. That brings us to a total of 24 states, plus the District of Columbia, now recognizing some form of direct democracy.

## Truly democratic?

However, many have pointed to problems with direct democracy in the form of ballot initiatives.

[Maxwell Sterns](#) at the University of Maryland, for example, writes that legislatures are better because initiatives are the tools of special interests and minorities. In the end, initiatives are voted upon by an unrepresentative subset of the population, Sterns concludes.

[Others](#) like Richard Ellis of Willamette University argue that the time-consuming process of gathering signatures introduces a bias toward moneyed interests. Some suggest this has damaged direct democracy in California, where professional petition writers and paid signature gatherers dominate the process. Moneyed interests also enjoy a natural advantage in having the resources that ordinary people lack to mount media campaigns to support their narrow interests.

To curb this kind of problem, bans on paying people per signature are proposed in many states, but have not yet passed any legislature. However, because Californians like direct democracy in principle, they have recently [amended the process](#) to allow for a review and revision, and they require mandatory disclosures about the funding and origins of ballot initiatives.

Finally, some say initiatives can be confusing for voters, like the two [recent Ohio propositions](#) concerning marijuana, where one ballot proposition essentially canceled out the other. Similarly, Mississippi's [Initiative 42](#) required marking the ballot in two places for approval but only one for disapproval, resulting in numerous nullified "yes" votes.

## Routes to happiness

Despite these flaws, our research shows that direct democracy might improve happiness in two ways.

One is through its psychological effect on voters, making them feel they have a direct impact on policy outcomes. This holds even if they may not like, and thus vote against, a particular proposition. The second is that it may indeed produce policies more consistent with human well being.

The psychological benefits are obvious. By allowing people literally to be the government, just

## Direct democracy may be key to a happier American democracy

Written by The Conversation USA

---

as in ancient [Athens](#) , people develop higher levels of [political efficacy](#) . In short, they may feel they have some control over their lives. Direct democracy can give people [political capital](#) because it offers a means by which citizens may place issues on the ballot for popular vote, giving them an opportunity both to set the agenda and to vote on the outcome.

We think this is important today given America's declining faith in government. [Overall today](#) only 19 percent believe the government is run for all citizens. The same percentage trusts government to mostly do what is right. The poor and working classes are even more alienated.

### The survey says

Our evidence comes from surveys of the American public large enough to allow comparisons across states.

Specifically, we used DDB-Needham Advertising's [Life Style Studies](#) . Beginning in 1975, this study annually asks large numbers of Americans about trends, behaviors, beliefs and opinions. The study uses such large samples we can directly examine the impact of initiatives on satisfaction in spite of the fact that it has multiple state and individual level causes.

The statistical evidence is clear.

Life satisfaction is higher in [states that allow initiatives](#) than in those that do not. This holds even when controlling for other factors. Satisfaction also increases as the cumulative use of initiatives increases over time. In other words, the more frequently a state has used initiatives to create its current policies, the happier people are.

States that use the initiative tend to have policies that help protect citizen prosperity, health, and security, all of which [contribute to greater happiness](#) .

This may be because citizens themselves use the initiative process to implement laws that directly aid them. Or it could be that legislators are more attentive to citizen well being in states

## Direct democracy may be key to a happier American democracy

Written by The Conversation USA

---

that have mechanisms for initiative, referendum, and recall. Either way, the net impact on both satisfaction and well being is positive.

Perhaps more importantly, the study finds that lower and middle income people benefit most from initiatives. Simply put, the happiness of the rich and powerful in a state increases less (or even declines slightly) relative to happiness boost that ordinary citizens receive.

In other words, the greatest increase goes to those who are the least happy to begin with, effectively reducing the “satisfaction inequality” between the rich and poor.

*The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/direct-democracy-may-be-key-to-a-happier-american-democracy-52417>