Where Did They All Go?
Testing the Conventional Wisdom That Proposition Support Inevitably Declines

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom says that a California ballot proposition that starts off in polling below 50% support will rarely win. In fact, the conventional wisdom holds that support for propositions falls during the course of the campaigns. This paper tests this conventional wisdom, using all those propositions surveyed on by the Field Corporation from 1997 to 2010. Is the conventional wisdom right or was it right at one time? Is it true of all propositions or just those dealing with some issues?

“The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking”
- John Kenneth Galbraith

Political scientists often like to disparage the “conventional wisdom.” Doing so serves to distinguish academia from the masses. But, as John Kenneth Galbraith’s famous quote reminds us, it is also squarely within the academic functions of learning and teaching, for the conventional wisdom is often wrong, or at least misleading.

The problem with testing “the conventional wisdom” is that it is often a hard concept to nail down. There are often competing versions of what that “conventional wisdom” is—making it hardly “conventional!” They are often unclearly stated. When they are clear, they often speak of absolutes, a level of proof rarely used in empirical (particularly quantitative) political science.

All of this does not preclude using “conventional wisdom” as an inspiration to derive theory from. What it does, though, is induce caution in interpreting findings as definitively rejecting or confirming these theories, since they are not necessarily based in a concrete logic, but are often purely inductive observations.

This paper attempts to test one nugget of conventional wisdom that I have heard from political consultants and academics in California over the years: “if a proposition doesn’t have majority support the first time it’s polled on, it’s going to lose.”¹ There are a number of ways of interpreting this statement. In particular, what it means for a proposition to first poll “down” is open to interpretation. One way this could be understood is if fewer people support it than oppose it—a majority of those with an opinion, in other words A second way is that a proposition first polls support below 50%—an absolute majority. Corollaries or alternative versions of this conventional wisdom include:

¹ This is a very preliminary draft of this paper. In particular, there is no real treatment of the existing scholarly literature in this version, for which I apologize.
“support for propositions always goes down.” This implies that the first version presented above is the product of a universal downward trend in support. Thus, polling above 50% at first indicates nothing more than some “cushion” for the inevitable loss of support. This version could be represented as: First Poll – X = Final Vote, where X is uniformly positive. Thus, if the first poll isn’t above 50%, it would guarantee the final vote would not be. Related to this corollary is the idea that support goes down more or less uniformly, thus meaning that there would be some better threshold—55%, 60%, 65%—that would more accurately predict passage or failure.

“when in doubt, voters stick with the status quo.” This implies that the reason for propositions failing if they poll below majority support is that the undecided voters will break decisively against the proposition. This corollary thus leans more heavily on that second interpretation of what it means to poll “down.” For this version, a proposition that is ahead 52%-43% is much safer than one that polls 49%-40%, or possibly even one that polls 49%-45%. The focus of this wisdom is decidedly on the undecided voters.

Data and Analysis

The data for this paper come from the Field Polls conducted on initiatives from 1998 to 2010. Future work will expand this dataset to include the entire history of the Field Poll, which dates to 1947. The Field Poll was selected because it offers a continuous record of polling on initiatives in California, a state famous for their use. The Field Poll also has employed a consistent methodology in polling on initiatives, reducing the risk of question formats impacting
The methodology of the Field Poll is elegant in its simplicity. Rather than attempting to figure out neutral phrasings for controversial issues, the Field Poll simply reads voters the official ballot language before asking respondents their vote intentions. This avoids the problem of biased language, for whatever bias is introduced in the question is identical to the bias facing the voter in the voting booth.

Patterns in the Data

California has kept up with its rather frenetic pace of direct democracy over the last decade. There have been 150 direct democracy votes in California since 1998; one of these votes was for the recall of Governor Gray Davis, and while there is polling on this question, it is excluded from this analysis. Of these votes, the Field Poll conducted surveys on 89 of these propositions (both initiatives and referenda), most of them multiple times. Table 1 summarizes the availability of polling data.

Table 1 Availability of Polling Data on California Propositions, 1998-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total propositions</th>
<th>149</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositions polled</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of polls per proposition (mean)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of number of polls per proposition</td>
<td>1-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of days between first poll and election</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of days between first poll and election</td>
<td>11-359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a great deal of variation in the amount of polling propositions receive. 40% of propositions on the ballot never get polled on. This is natural, as the

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2 The use of the Field Polls may reduce this risk, but it does not eliminate it. The Field Poll methodology means that changes in the official ballot language force changes in the questions asked of respondents. Such changes are relatively rare, however.
3 Days between poll and election are determined by taking the median date of when the poll was in the field. In the case of Field Polls, almost all are in the field from 3-14 days, with most in the field for 4-8 days.
Field Poll is generally conducting polls for media clients, and many propositions are simply not that interesting. The large range of data available for various propositions owes a lot to the initiative process. Rumors of large signature drives can induce the Field Poll to survey opinions on an issue, only to later find that the initiative gets on a later ballot than was first assumed. Also, some issues don’t seem interesting at first, and only later in the campaign do they seem worthy of polling.

*Does Starting Down Guarantee Failure?*

As noted above, the “conventional wisdom” regarding California ballot propositions isn’t fully clear. One version of this conventional wisdom holds that if ballot propositions don’t poll over 50% the first time, they are destined to fail. The weaker version simply holds that they must poll a majority amongst those who express an opinion. This paper will test both versions.

The outcome of proposition votes is related to their first poll results, but only weakly. The final vote outcome is correlated at 0.32 with the support level in the first poll, and correlated at 0.38 with that support only amongst those expressing an opinion. Figure 1 is a scatterplot of the first set of data. While not nothing, these data do no really suggest anything like an “iron law” is operating.
This is not an indictment of the Field Poll data, however. The final Field Poll taken mere days before the election (usually in the week or fortnight before the election in question) is quite accurate. The correlation between the final vote outcome and these poll results is quite strong, 0.80 for the support level alone, and 0.87 amongst only those expressing an opinion. This improvement is likely due to two reasons. First, campaigns happen, and people change their minds. Second, the Field Poll’s likely voter screen naturally improves as the election approaches, if only because voters can better answer questions regarding their likelihood of voting and interest in the election.
However, the conventional wisdom, naturally, is not about the Pearson correlation coefficient. Thus, we need a more direct test. Tables 2 and 3 are crosstabs of the final vote outcome and the first poll results for the strong and weak version, respectively.

### Table 2  Crosstab of Vote Outcomes with First Poll Majority Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Polled below 50%</th>
<th>Polled above 50%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failed</td>
<td>27 (63%)</td>
<td>20 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed</td>
<td>16 (37%)</td>
<td>26 (56%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square: 3.326, p = .07

### Table 3  Crosstab of Vote Outcomes with First Poll Plurality Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Polled behind</th>
<th>Polled ahead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failed</td>
<td>15 (79%)</td>
<td>32 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed</td>
<td>4 (21%)</td>
<td>38 (54%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square: 6.623, p = .01

At first look, the data in Tables 2 and 3 are only mildly supportive of the conventional wisdom. The key data is that in the first column of each table. The conventional wisdom doesn’t say that polling ahead on the initial poll means the proposition will pass, but that polling behind means it will fail. 37% of propositions that start out with less than majority support go on to fail. While polling below 50% does indicate that a proposition is more likely to fail, the difference is statistically insignificant and substantively quite small; three out of every eight propositions that start below 50% go on to pass. The results for the plurality are somewhat more convincing; only 21% of those that start behind go on to pass. Furthermore, data on one of these, Proposition 21 in 2000, is dubious. The first poll on Proposition 21 included only a short form description of the measure, as the Secretary of State was indicating at the time that most counties would use that
form. However, a few weeks later, it was revealed that only a few smaller counties would use that version, whereas most voters would see a very different version. That different version polled much better in the Field Poll; 55% support versus 30% support for the short form, and 32% opposed (versus 47% opposed to the short form). Thus, it might be best to not drop that case (or include it as one that received both majority and plurality support in its first polling). If we drop this case, only 3 propositions that failed to get majority support on their first asking ended up passing (17%).

The other 3 propositions that initially polled down but passed are Propositions 57 and 64 in 2004, and Proposition 8 in 2008. Table 4 shows some summary information on these three propositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Passed Propositions That Initially Polled Behind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposition 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>Primary 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Debt financing bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Vote Share</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Field Poll Support/Oppose</td>
<td>33/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Field Poll Support/Oppose</td>
<td>50/36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proposition 57 is one that had a great deal of movement, from 33% support/40% opposed to 50% support/36% opposed in the final Field Poll. Proposition 64 had the highest proportion respond “don’t know” in the final Field Poll of any proposition in the dataset at 31%, and the second highest at the first Field Poll (38%). Proposition 8 is a particularly interesting case. Field Polls on gay marriage in California have consistently shown restrictions to be unpopular. In the Field Poll’s data, same sex marriage legality has been approved of by majorities or near majorities in
It seems that the Field Poll methodology consistently overstates support for gay marriage by a significant margin. For example, in 2002, Proposition 22 defined marriage as being between a man and a woman, and Field Polls underestimated the support for that proposition as well. Interestingly, this may be an artifact in the Field Polls only, as previous scholars have found little evidence of a “Gay Bradley Effect.” (Egan 2008)

Proposition 57 represents the truest refutation of the conventional wisdom, in that voter opinion clearly shifted in its favor over the course of the campaign. Proposition 64 is a partial refutation, owing to the rather high levels of undecided voters (a theme to which we shall return shortly). Proposition 8 is a case where the polling appears to simply understate support for restrictions on gay marriage; the conventional wisdom is not really about polling biases on one issue, but propositions generally. And Proposition 21 was simply a case of a change in ballot language, so the poll was asking the wrong question. In sum, then, the conventional wisdom, given the benefit of the doubt, is quite accurate: 15 of 17 propositions that polled support lower than opposition went on to lose. On the other hand, the conventional wisdom as it’s commonly stated in the strong form is clearly overstated. Propositions that initially poll under 50% win quite commonly. Naturally, they don’t win as often as those that poll above 50%, but that simply means that voter preferences are relatively stable.

*Does Opposition to Propositions Increase?*

Another weak form of the conventional wisdom is that propositions that start behind won’t win because, in the face of competing (and often transparently misleading) advertisements
from rival camps, voters will simply take the “safe” option of the status quo. As a first test of this, let us consider a few simple differences—those between the first poll and last polls, and between the first poll and the final vote tally.

Figures 2 and 3 are histograms of the difference between the first poll and the final outcome. Figure 2 uses the raw measure of support in the first poll, whereas Figure 3 uses the measure after dropping the undecideds. The mean difference using the first measure is a scant 1.4 percentage points, a statistically insignificant difference for most cases. Note, however, the large concentration of polls that only slightly underestimated the final support. These are essentially accounted for by the allocation of some undecided voters either to the support tally, or removed from the pool of voters entirely (either by not showing up to vote as the likely voter screens thought they would or by “rolling off” and not casting a vote for that proposition). In fact, consider Figure 3, which ignores these undecided voters.
The histogram in Figure 3 is quite different, lending support to the conventional wisdom. Support in final passage is, on average, nearly 11 percentage points lower. This is still not a law, but a trend, as there are 14 propositions that did better than their initial polling, but usually not more than a few percentage points better. On the other hand, 17 propositions did more than 20 percentage points worse than the initial poll indicated. The evidence, then, is mixed. The initial polls can understate or overstate support by a large margin, but if we only consider those expressing an opinion, it seems like overstating, sometimes by quite large amounts, is much more common.
In truth, though, just dropping the undecided voters is only one way of looking at this question. Taken literally, an increase in opposition is not the same thing as a decrease in support. Figure 4 pursues this more literal interpretation. The mean difference between opposition in the first poll and the final vote is nearly 18 percentage points. Moreover, in every case but six, final opposition is higher than initial poll opposition. In those six cases, the differences are small, less than four percentage points. Naturally, a good portion of this is found in allocating the undecideds. There are no undecideds reported in vote totals, so, as noted earlier, those who were undecided in the poll either had to vote yes or no, not turnout, or abstain from voting on that
proposition. But, compare Figure 4 to Figure 2. Simply comparing these two not-quite-identical numbers for support gave a distribution roughly centered on 0 for support, but decidedly centered towards negative numbers (or higher final totals) for opposition. So, while political observers might have been mistaking the disappearance of voters for increases in either side, their “disappearance” clearly ends up hurting passage. The conventional wisdom seems largely correct.

Figure 4 Difference in Opposition Between First Poll and Passage Vote

Mean = -17.92
Std. Dev. = 12.21
N = 89

Difference between first poll opposition and passage vote opposition
Histograms fail to tell the whole story, though, and only looking at support or opposition limits our vision too much. Let us consider both support and opposition together by looking at the margin between them. Figure 5 provides a clearer picture of this by plotting the margin in the first poll against the margin in the election results, and the picture is stark. The vast majority of points fall below the 45 degree line, meaning that margins of victory tend to shrink, and do so substantially. The average proposition loses nearly 20 points from that initial margin.4

4 This seems like a larger number than it is. A proposition that initially polls ahead 52-48 and loses 48-52 has an 8 point drop by this measure, even though the final results are not far outside the margin of error of most polls.
However, let us revisit this question by asking what happens to opposition strictly within the context of the polling, to avoid the turnout and rolloff questions. Figure 6 shows the histogram for the differences in support between the first and last poll, whereas Figure 7 shows the differences in opposition.

**Figure 6**  Difference Between First Poll Support and Last Poll Support

- Mean = 6.43
- Std. Dev. = 10.33
- N = 83
As Figures 6 and 7 make clear, support tends to ebb somewhat over the course of the campaign, whereas opposition almost always grows. Polling on 22 propositions showed no change or an increase in support over the campaign; 8 of those changes are statistically significant increases. On the other side, 37 of the 61 negative changes are statistically significant. Of the remaining 61 positive changes, 42 are statistically significant. Of the remaining 61 positive changes, 42 are statistically significant.

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5 The number is a coincidence, although most of those that have a decrease in opposition have an increase in support.
Thus, propositions tend to poll worse, no matter how we frame it, as the election nears. While not a rule, declines are much more common than increases. The margin between support and opposition only improved for 17 propositions. More significantly, coming back from being behind is fantastically rare. Only one proposition in the dataset made a statistically significant improvement in its polling when starting behind: Proposition 57 in 2004.

*Evolution of Opinions Over Time*

In light of this discussion, it should come as no surprise that polling on most propositions shows a downward trend of support over the course of the months prior to the election. However, consider the data presented in Figure 8. What is most interesting about this graph is the similarity of the declines in support. Once it gets within the last 3 months before an election, most propositions show slight, but consistent declines over time. However, there is a second pattern in these data. A reasonably large subset of propositions found that support increased between the second-to-last and final poll.
The story for opposition (see Figure 9) looks much the same in reverse, with one important difference. Almost all propositions see an increase in opposition in the last poll. As with support, much of this is due to people who “didn’t know” making a decision as the election nears. This makes sense; campaigns have changed their minds, either through persuasion or simple queue-giving. However, before we consider proposition campaigns informative, consider Figure 10.⁶ There is a sharp decrease in indecision between the penultimate and final polls. People are making up their minds, but it isn’t clear that this is due to campaigns. The reason is that there is a large increase in indecision from the first poll to the second, regardless of how far

⁶ Note that the scales for Figures 8 & 9 versus Figure 10 differ significantly. Rather than scale down to drop out the earliest polls taken 4-6 months out, I have opted to keep those points in the graph to make a point about the difference between the first and second polls, as well as between the last and penultimate polls.
out the polls are taken! If we think about the way in which the Field Corporation decides to poll on a proposition (a combination of their own interests, their intuitions over what propositions will be interesting to clients, explicit requests from clients, and clients subsidizing some polls), then we might interpret the length of time that propositions are polled on to depend on how “sensational” or “sexy” an issue is. What is odd, then, is that the increase in indecision doesn’t seem to have anything to do with how far out that first poll is. Proposition campaigns rarely begin in earnest 150 days before an election. This increase in indecision is still, then, odd.

Figure 9  Opposition Over Time for Propositions with More Than Three Polls
Future Directions

This paper is very much a preliminary effort. A number of improvements in this effort are immediately apparent. First, the data considered are restricted to the most recent years simply as a product of the time to collect and code the data. Further work will extend this analysis back through the entire history of the Field Poll.

Second, this work is entirely descriptive; the next stage aims to explain some of these patterns. For example, the increase and decrease in the numbers of undecided voters. It could be that the first conversations people have about propositions or the first they hear about them
through the media serve to convince some people that propositions (or the issues surrounding a given public policy) aren’t as cut-and-dried as they first believed. This doesn’t quite seem right though, as this tends to happen regardless of how far out from the election that first poll is, whereas coverage of propositions or people talking about them should be heavily concentrated in just those few months before the election. Perhaps the Field Poll going into the field is an indication that the issue is already being talked about (or will be soon, as that poll is likely to get media coverage in state newspapers).

Further exploration of what exactly these patterns show is necessary as well. The natural expectation when support goes down and indecision goes up is that supporters became undecided, but it’s possible that opponents became undecided and some supporters became opponents. When the margins shift, that could be moderated through the undecideds, or could simply represent movement amongst those who insist on being decided.

Continuing with moving this project into a more explanatory phase, a number of potential explanations for why these patterns exist could be explored. The most obvious of these are campaign expenditures, media or other endorsements, and the nature of the issues at hand. For example, do “hard” and “easy” issues move differently? (Carmines and Stimson 1980) However, those are just some of the questions at the aggregate level. At the individual level, we could ask whether the more educated, more informed, more partisan, more ideological, more socially connected, or more efficacious differ from those with less of those characteristics. And, naturally, there could be interactive (including cross-level interactive) effects.
References
