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Minority Voices and Citizen Attitudes about Government Responsiveness in the American States: Do Social and Institutional Context Matter?

RODNEY E. HERO AND CAROLINE J. TOLBERT*

Previous research has shown that institutional factors, particularly ‘direct democracy’, along with racial context, shape policy outcomes in the fifty American states. But less is understood about the impact of such factors on attitudes towards government of racial and ethnic minorities. The passage of ballot initiatives targeting minority interests might be expected to have a negative effect on these groups. This study considers the impact of institutional and social context on attitudes about government responsiveness (external efficacy), drawing on pooled NES survey data from 1988–98 merged with state level data. Consistent with previous research, which was based on a single year, there is strong evidence that citizens in states with frequent exposure to direct democracy are more likely to perceive that government is responsive to their needs. At the same time, direct democracy did not have the hypothesized detrimental impact on racial and ethnic group attitudes towards government in general. State racial context also did not have a measurable impact on individual-level attitudes. Regardless of state environmental contexts, however, racial and ethnic minorities (with the exception of Latinos) reported less confidence in government than whites. The findings have broader implications, particularly given the growing racial and ethnic diversity and the ongoing politics of democratic inclusion in America.

A considerable body of literature documents the descriptive underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minority groups in formal positions of American politics. However, little is known about how institutional practices might affect the political attitudes of racial and ethnic minorities. How do political institutions – beyond the electoral arrangements, which are often studied – affect minorities’ attitudes and, indirectly, political ‘voice’? This research explores whether, and if so, how, social context and institutional factors shape attitudes towards the political process. Specifically, we consider the possible impact of ‘direct democracy’ and racial/ethnic context on the political efficacy of non-whites.

Much of the research examining the impact of direct democracy on racial and ethnic minorities has focused on policy outcomes. A common question has been whether direct democracy allows a white electoral majority to override the preferences of blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans.¹ While this question is certainly important, direct

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¹ B. Gamble, ‘Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 91 (1997), 245–69; P. Schrag, *Paradise Lost: California’s Experience, America’s Future* (New York: New York Press, 1998); T. Donovan and S. Bowler, ‘Direct Democracy and Minority Rights: An Extension’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 42 (1998), 1020–4; T. Donovan and S. Bowler, ‘Responsive or Responsible Government?’ in S. Bowler, T. Donovan and C. Tolbert, eds, *Citizens as Legislators: Direct Democracy in the United States* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 249–73. S. Bowler and T. Donovan, ‘Popular Control of Referendum Agendas: Implications for Democratic Outcomes and Minority Rights’, in M. Mendelsohn and A. Parkin, eds, *Referendum Democracy: Citizens, Elites, and Deliberation in Referendum Campaigns* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Z. Hajnal, E. Gerber and H. Louch, ‘Minorities and Direct Legislation: Evidence from California Ballot Proposition Elections’, *Journal of Politics*, 64 (2002), 154–77; B. Frey and L. Goette, ‘Does the Popular Vote Destroy Civil Rights?’ *American Journal of Political Science*, 41 (1998), 245–69.

democracy may have other impacts that also warrant consideration. Institutions shape the context in which actors make policy choices.² As a state-level political institution, provisions for direct democracy (initiatives and referendums) may shape general attitudes about government. As a majoritarian decision-making institution, the initiative process may affect who is more or less likely to be a ‘winner’ in policy controversies, and may thus shape general perceptions of government and politics. This study assesses the indirect impact ballot initiatives may have on attitudes of racial and ethnic groups about government. Such a study contributes to a more complete understanding and assessment of direct democracy.

Previous research has suggested that the convergence of a racial demographic context and institutional factors is associated with the adoption of public policies targeting racial/ethnic minority groups.³ White voters may use the initiative process to circumvent state legislatures where minorities have gained access. This has been raised most directly concerning California, the most ethnically diverse state in the United States and one with historically high usage of ballot initiatives and referendums.⁴ But because California has been the primary subject of study, a central institutional factor – availability of direct democracy procedures – has been held constant. What might be the general impact of racial diversity and direct democracy on citizen attitudes about government responsiveness across the fifty United States? That is the central question examined in this article.

Recent research has examined attitudes towards government, with a major focus on explaining declining trust in government.⁵ Increasingly, such analyses have incorporated the effects of institutional contexts,⁶ examining the link between voter trust and attitudes and outcomes, i.e., whether the voter ‘wins’ or ‘loses’, under differing institutional

² J. March and J. Olsen, ‘The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life’, *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), 734–49; J. March and J. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions* (New York: Free Press, 1989); S. Steinmo, K. Thelen and F. Longstreth, eds, *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); S. Steinmo, ‘Political Institutions and Tax Policy in the United States, Sweden, and Britain’, *World Politics*, 41 (1989), 500–34; B. G. Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism* (New York: Pinter, 1999).

³ Schrag, *Paradise Lost*; C. Tolbert and R. Hero, ‘Dealing with Diversity: Racial/Ethnic Context and Social Policy Change’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 54 (2001), 571–604.

⁴ R. Alvarez and T. Butterfield, ‘The Resurgence of Nativism in California? The Case of Proposition 187 and Illegal Immigration’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 81 (2000), 167–79; B. Cain, ‘Voting Rights and Democratic Theory: Toward a Color-Blind Society?’ in B. Grofman and C. Davidson, eds, *Controversies in Minority Voting* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1992); Shrag, *Paradise Lost*; Tolbert and Hero, ‘Dealing with Diversity’; Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, ‘Minorities and Direct Legislation’; M. Preston, B. Cain and S. Bass, eds, *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁵ M. Hetherington, ‘The Political Relevance of Political Trust’, *American Political Science Review*, 92 (1998), 791–808; M. Hetherington, ‘The Effects of Political Trust on the Presidential Vote, 1968–96’, *American Political Science Review*, 92 (1999), 311–26; P. Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America: Formation and Change* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1993); P. Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); S. Craig, ed., *Broken Contract? Changing Relationships Between Americans and their Government* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); J. Citrin, ‘Who’s the Boss? Direct Democracy and the Popular Control of Government’, in S. Craig, ed., *Broken Contract* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

⁶ C. Anderson and C. Guilory, ‘Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-National Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems’, *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1997), 66–81; S. Gordon and G. Segura, ‘Cross National Variation in the Political Sophistication of Individuals: Capability of Choice?’ *Journal of Politics*, 59 (1997), 26–47; R. Huckfeldt and J. Sprague, ‘Choice, Social-Structure, and Political Information – The Informational Coercion of Minorities’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 32 (1988), 467–82. See also John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, ‘Process Preferences and American Politics: What the People Want Government to Be’, *American Political Science Review*, 95 (2001), 145–53.

conditions. Institutions may thus shape perceptions of the political process by affecting the extent to which an individual wins or loses.⁷

Analysis suggests minority groups in California, particularly Latinos, are more likely to lose on ballot initiatives targeting their group interests;⁸ Latinos are the largest ethnic group in California, comprising almost a third of the state's population.⁹ If a particular institution is associated with highly visible political losses, perhaps this shapes the general attitudes towards government held by racial and ethnic minorities, and non-minorities as well. The passage of ballot initiatives targeting minority interests may stigmatize these groups, leading to decreased efficacy and more negative attitudes about politics and government.¹⁰ If ethnic minorities are more likely to lose in initiative elections, this may be linked to reduced political efficacy, potentially further undermining minority turnout rates and, thus, 'voice' in the political process. Hence, ballot initiatives may have broader consequences for American democracy than generally acknowledged.

RECONSIDERING MINORITIES AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

While institutions of direct democracy, as the term connotes, may be more participatory, the process may have certain anti-democratic effects, especially within particular racial contexts. The effects of majoritarian decision-making institutions on minority groups are and have been major concerns in American political thinking. In *Federalist* No. 10, Madison argued that a representative form of government is a preferable means of protecting the rights of political minorities and preventing majority tyranny and the mischief of factions than is direct democracy.¹¹ In *Federalist* No. 51, Madison further cautioned, 'If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure.'¹² If the initiative process permits, perhaps even encourages, political majorities to circumvent representative institutions, it is then important to consider the impacts on the attitudes and perceptions of groups. This is especially so for those already disadvantaged in other dimensions of the political process, namely racial/ethnic minorities.

Whether minority groups face 'majority tyranny' in contemporary direct democracy elections is the subject of considerable debate. Some claim that 'because it enables the voters' racial beliefs and fears to be recorded and tabulated in their pure form, the referendum has been a most effective facilitator of that bias, discrimination, and prejudice which has marred American democracy from its earliest day.'¹³ Similarly, some research suggests that when 'civil rights' measures targeting minorities are placed on the ballot, they are more likely to pass than other types of initiatives, and more likely to be adopted by wide margins.¹⁴ Other scholars question these findings, however, on both methodological and theoretical grounds, and suggest direct democracy is not

⁷ Norris, *Critical Citizens*; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth, *Structuring Politics*.

⁸ Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, 'Minorities and Direct Legislation'.

⁹ M. Baldassare, *California in the New Millennium: The Changing Social and Political Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁰ J. Wenzel, T. Donovan and S. Bowler. 'Direct Democracy and Minorities: Changing Attitudes about Minorities Targeted by Initiatives', in Bowler, Donovan and Tolbert, eds, *Citizens as Legislators*, pp. 228–48.

¹¹ J. Madison, *Federalist Nos. 10 and 51* (New York: New American Library, [1787] 1937), p. 54.

¹² Madison, *Federalist Nos. 10 and 51*, p. 339.

¹³ D. Bell, 'The Referendum Democracy's Barrier to Racial Equality', *Washington Law Review*, 54 (1978), 1–29.

¹⁴ Gamble, 'Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote'.

necessarily more detrimental to minority interests than are traditional representative institutions.¹⁵

When the subject matter of Californian ballot initiatives directly affects racial and ethnic minorities, surveys indicate that in most cases the outcome of the vote favoured the white majority over the preferences of minority groups. Latinos, blacks and Asian Americans were, for example, strongly opposed to Proposition 209 that ended state affirmative action programmes in hiring, contracting and college admissions.¹⁶ Majorities of blacks, Asian American and Latinos opposed Proposition 187, which denied social services to 'illegal' immigrants, but strong white support led to passage of the measure.¹⁷ A comprehensive study of Californian ballot initiatives examined outcomes across the array of issues addressed through direct democracy in California over the period 1980 through 1998 (forty-seven propositions) using fifteen pooled *Los Angeles Times* polls. It found that racial and ethnic minorities – and Latinos, in particular – lose regularly on a number of racially targeted propositions.¹⁸ Racial cleavages may also occur even when ostensibly 'race-neutral' policies, such as health care, education and fiscal policy, are at issue. There is evidence of a racial divide in support for health policy measures on the Californian ballots, with blacks and Latinos significantly more likely than whites to support creation of a universal health care system in 1986.¹⁹ Might the presence of ballot initiatives especially germane to minority interests have a stigmatizing effect on these groups,²⁰ leading to diminished political efficacy?

Much of the debate over direct democracy and racial minorities inadequately considers social context, especially variations in the racial and ethnic composition of states and sub-state areas.²¹ Analysis of voting patterns in four Californian initiative elections targeting minority groups over a twelve-year period found the white vote varied systematically by the demographic composition of the county.²² The highest support for the ballot propositions was among whites residing in 'bifurcated' environments (those with large minority, black and/or Latino, populations): minority groups may be subject to a

¹⁵ Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, 'Minorities and Direct Legislation'; Donovan and Bowler, 'Direct Democracy and Minority Rights'; Donovan and Bowler, 'Responsive or Responsible Government?'; T. Donovan, J. Wenzel and S. Bowler, 'Direct Democracy and Gay Rights Initiatives after Romer', in C. Rimmerman, K. Wald and C. Wilcox, *The Politics of Gay Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Frey and Goette, 'Does the Popular Vote Destroy Civil Rights?'

¹⁶ The initiative was opposed by 91 per cent of blacks, 74 per cent of Asian Americans and 71 per cent of Latinos, but was enacted with strong white support (*Los Angeles Times* exit poll quoted in Lydia Chavez, *The Color Bind: California's Battle to End Affirmative Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁷ C. Tolbert and R. Hero, 'Race/Ethnicity and Direct Democracy: An Analysis of California's Illegal Immigration Initiative', *Journal of Politics*, 58 (1996), 806–18; Alvarez and Butterfield, 'The Resurgence of Nativism in California? The Case of Proposition 187 and Illegal Immigration'; Preston, Cain and Bass, *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California*. See also J. Citrin, B. Reingold, E. Walters and D. Green, 'The "Official English" Movement and the Symbolic Politics of Language in the United States', *Western Political Quarterly*, 43 (1990), 535–60.

¹⁸ Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, 'Minorities and Direct Legislation'.

¹⁹ C. Tolbert and G. Steuermagel, 'Race/Ethnicity and Referenda on Redistributive Health Care', in R. Fording, J. Soss and S. Schram, eds, *Race, Welfare, and the Politics of Reform* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). See also D. Kinder and L. Sanders, *Divide By Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), for a general discussion of how race motivates whites' views on policy with no apparent racial connotation.

²⁰ Wenzel, Donovan and Bowler, 'Direct Democracy and Minorities'.

²¹ R. Hero, *Faces of Inequality: Social Diversity in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²² Tolbert and Hero, 'Dealing with Diversity'.

white backlash in initiative elections.²³ Social ‘heterogeneity’, particularly higher ‘white ethnic’ diversity, is associated with lower white support for the ballot measures.

POLITICAL TRUST, EFFICACY AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

While direct democracy might lead to lower political efficacy of minorities, it might have a positive general impact on citizen attitudes towards government. If whites are more likely to ‘win’ in direct democracy elections than other racial and ethnic groups, this may shape their broader attitudes about government and the political process. Notably, proponents of direct democracy argue that allowing citizens to vote directly on policy questions should increase citizen participation as well as efficacy and trust in government,²⁴ although others argue the process has little impact. Research examining the impact of direct democracy on citizen participation over the past twenty-five years finds that states with frequent use of ballot initiatives have higher voter turnout rates.²⁵ Because voters can directly adopt policy, one might expect that citizens living in initiative states should perceive government as more responsive; thus, a potential consequence of direct democracy concerns political efficacy. But there is little empirical research addressing the question of initiatives and citizen attitudes towards government, particularly regarding efficacy, in the United States.

One of the few previous studies to examine the relationship between direct democracy and trust in government found no difference in trust in government across states with and without direct democracy; it examined attitudes aggregated to the state level and treated the presence of the initiative process as a simple dichotomy.²⁶ In contrast, Bowler and Donovan find that actual exposure to direct democracy gives citizens a greater sense that they can influence government.²⁷ Utilizing 1992 American National Election Study (NES) survey data merged with the total number of initiatives that have appeared on state ballots, they find that more frequent exposure to ballot initiatives is associated with higher levels of political efficacy. Citizens living in states with more initiatives tend to have more positive views of their own political abilities (internal efficacy) and look more favourably on the responsiveness of government (external efficacy); indeed, the effect of exposure to direct democracy on internal and external political efficacy rivalled the effects of formal education. Thus, state-level institutions may contribute to democracy by instilling a greater sense of citizens’ ability to shape what their governments do.

However, some evidence also indicates reduced political efficacy of non-whites in states with frequent use of direct democracy. Bowler and Donovan examined whether direct democracy reduces the political efficacy of non-whites, using an interaction term

²³ V. O. Key Jr, *Southern Politics – In State and Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1949); M. Giles and A. Evans, ‘The Power Approach to Intergroup Hostility’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 30 (1986), 469–86; Hero, *Faces of Inequality*.

²⁴ M. Morell, ‘Citizens’ Evaluations of Participatory Democratic Procedures: Normative Theory Meets Empirical Science’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 52 (1999), 293–322; B. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970)..

²⁵ C. Tolbert, J. Grummel and D. A. Smith, ‘The Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout in the American States’, *American Politics Research*, 29 (2001), 625–48; M. Smith, ‘The Contingent Effects of Ballot Initiatives and Candidate Races on Turnout’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 45 (2001), 700–6.

²⁶ Citrin, ‘Who’s the Boss?’

²⁷ S. Bowler and T. Donovan, ‘Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes about Citizen Influence on Government’; *British Journal of Political Science*, 32 (2002), 371–90; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, ‘Process Preferences’; Martin Gilleus, James Glasner and Tali Mendelberg, ‘Having a Say: Political Efficacy in the Context of Direct Democracy’ (paper given at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2001).

between race of the (non-white) respondent and initiative use in the respondent's state.²⁸ While the effects of race are less consistent, their analysis shows some evidence that racial minorities have lower levels of efficacy (internal and external) in states with more frequent usage of the initiative. Greater reliance on direct democracy seems to have an adverse effect on non-whites' perceptions of their capabilities as citizens and on their perceptions of government responsiveness. The complexity of these findings – that direct democracy may be beneficial for whites but detrimental for racial/ethnic minorities – provides background for the present research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Political efficacy is a complex concept and may partly be a function of environmental effects, including political institutions and racial contexts. But most research on political trust and efficacy has focused on individual effects, such as the media, and attitudinal and demographic factors. We are interested in exploring the contextual factors that shape political efficacy, especially the attitudes of racial and ethnic minorities. To do so, we use cross-level data on individual attitudes about government responsiveness and state institutional and racial contexts, constructed from pooled NES post-election surveys for 1988–98, census data and data on the use of ballot initiatives by state electorates.

A primary hypothesis is that experience with direct democracy may reduce positive attitudes about citizen participation in the political system for ethnic and racial minorities, perhaps more so where minorities represent a large proportion of the population. If the white electoral majority can, and sometimes does, override the preferences of minorities, minorities living in states with frequent usage of ballot initiatives might be expected to have reduced political efficacy compared to whites. At the same time, direct democracy could improve attitudes about government responsiveness for the general white population, especially if they are more likely to be winners under these institutional rules.

In twenty-four states in the United States, the initiative process allows citizens to draft new laws or amend the constitution by collecting a specified number of voter signatures.²⁹ Due to the stringency of petition requirements and judicial review some states where the institution exists rarely use the process (for example, Illinois, Mississippi, Wyoming), while in other states, such as California and Oregon, ballot initiatives are a common means of law making. In these states, the institution not only shapes policy outcomes, but could also affect the nature of the democratic process, and perceptions of government as well. Frequency of use of direct democracy is measured by the average annual number of initiatives appearing on state election ballots over the period 1970–92,³⁰ rather than using a dummy variable coding for states with and without the initiative process, as has been done in other studies. This measurement captures variation in use of the process over time. If actual exposure to direct democracy affects political attitudes, we would expect the frequency of initiative use in a state to explain some of the variation in individual level attitudes about political efficacy.

²⁸ Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes about Citizen Influence on Government'.

²⁹ D. Magleby, *Direct Legislation: Voting on Ballot Propositions in the US* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1984); T. Cronin, *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum and Recall* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); E. Gerber, *The Populist Paradox: Interest Group Influence and the Promise of Direct Legislation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

³⁰ C. Tolbert, D. Lowenstein and T. Donovan, 'Election Law and Rules for Using Initiatives', in Bowler, Donovan and Tolbert, eds, *Citizens as Legislators*.

Racial and ethnic diversity is important in explaining public policy in the American states, especially policies affecting minority groups.³¹ Racial diversity in state populations is associated with several outcomes that are principal policy responsibilities of state governments, such as education and incarceration rates. This social diversity interpretation contends that policy outcomes with detrimental impacts for minorities tend to be higher in the aggregate in jurisdictions with large racial/ethnic populations, or ‘bifurcation’;³² however, relatively detrimental outcomes for minorities are also found in homogeneous contexts.³³

Hill and Leighley find that greater racial diversity is associated with lower levels of voter mobilization, weaker mobilizing institutions and higher barriers to voter participation over time.³⁴ If high racial diversity is associated with lower voter turnout, it may also be related to political efficacy, an important predictor of political participation. High racial diversity in conjunction with another linkage mechanism or institution, direct democracy, may also have a negative impact on minority groups. But there is virtually no research on the impact of social context on attitudes about the political process or political trust, rather than policy outcomes or turnout.

MEASURING STATE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

To address these questions, we pool data from six American national post-election surveys (NES) from 1988 to 1998, each nationwide face-to-face survey conducted by the Inter-University Consortium for Social and Political Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.³⁵ From 1988 through 1998 the same questions were asked as in the 1992 NES survey used by Bowler and Donovan in 2002, thus providing a longitudinal dataset spanning a ten-year interval with which to assess the impact of direct democracy on citizen attitudes about government – for both racial and ethnic minorities, as well as whites. The pooled surveys also provide a sufficiently large sample of minority respondents to allow tests of institutional environments on separate racial and ethnic groups (Latinos, blacks and Asian Americans), rather than only a non-white/white comparison.

The pooled NES survey data are merged with state level data to explore the impact of state environmental contexts on individual level attitudes. Identifying a context’s boundaries is essential for understanding its potential effects.³⁶ Since state-wide ballot

³¹ Hero, *Faces of Inequality*; R. Hero and C. Tolbert, ‘A Racial/Ethnic Diversity Interpretation of Politics and Policy in the States of the US’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 40 (1996), 851–71; K. Hill and J. Leighley, ‘Racial Diversity, Voter Turnout, and Mobilizing Institutions in the United States’, *American Politics Quarterly*, 27 (1999), 275–95; Key, *Southern Politics*; Giles and Evans, ‘The Power Approach to Intergroup Hostility’; H. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-group Relations* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970).

³² Hero, *Faces of Inequality*; see also Key, *Southern Politics*; and Giles and Evans, ‘The Power Approach to Intergroup Hostility’.

³³ Hero, *Faces of Inequality*.

³⁴ K. Hill and J. Leighley, ‘Racial Diversity, Voter Turnout, and Mobilizing Institutions in the United States’ *American Politics Quarterly*, 27 (1999), 275–95.

³⁵ Since our research focuses on the political efficacy of racial and ethnic minorities it would have been preferable to use survey data with a larger sample of these populations. The Black National Election Survey (1996) and Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) (1990), however, do not sample in states with very low minority populations, nor do they provide ten-year longitudinal data. The NES data provides the best representation of the fifty states, providing an adequate sample of state institutional and social context and racial/ethnic minority groups.

³⁶ J. Oliver and T. Mendelberg, ‘Reconsidering the Environmental Determinants of White Racial Attitudes’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 44 (2000), 574–89.

propositions affect all residents of a state, the state is the appropriate level to measure institutional context. We constructed the contextual measures for the 8,033 white (non-Hispanic), 1,211 black (12.8 per cent), 370 Latino (3.8 per cent) and 123 Asian American (1.3 per cent) respondents with identifiable state ICPSR codes. Frequency of direct democracy use is measured by the average annual number of initiatives appearing on state election ballots over the period 1970–92.³⁷

State racial environments are an important variable in our analysis, and are measured by an index of racial and ethnic percentages. Though there are variations within states, the index provides a good indication of the racial diversity of a state and parallels the measurement of institutional contexts. An index of state minority diversity is used based on the size of Latino, black and Asian American populations using 1996 Current Population Surveys data.³⁸ Based on previous research focusing on policy outcomes,³⁹ minorities residing in bifurcated environments with sizeable minority populations would be expected to have lower political efficacy than those residing in more heterogeneous states.

To control for the overrepresentation of minorities residing in California and acknowledging that the experience of California may bias the results, a dummy variable for respondents living in California is included (coded 1, all others coded 0). The variable measures the effect of being in California – a unique state with high racial diversity and frequent use of direct democracy.⁴⁰ Following Bowler and Donovan's previous research, we also control for the degree of divided government in the state for the period 1988–98, because split party control of state government may affect citizen perceptions of government responsiveness.⁴¹

The data permit us to measure political efficacy with a variety of measures. Earlier research on political efficacy produced inconsistent findings, due in large part to the indicators used to assess efficacy and the fact that only one year at a time has typically been studied. Beginning in the 1970s, scholars came to view efficacy as having two major

³⁷ Tolbert, Lowenstein and Donovan, 'Election Law and Rules for Using Initiatives'. There are numerous ways to measure state variation in usage of direct democracy institutions. Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes', use the total number of initiatives that have appeared on state election ballots since inception of the process to measure cumulative exposure to direct democracy mechanisms. Since voters today were not part of the electorate in the early 1900s, the measure used in this research is deemed more appropriate. It also takes into account frequency of initiative use in states that recently adopted the process, such as Florida. There is a high correlation among the various measures of usage of the initiative process, suggesting that the substantive findings of the analysis would not change with a different operationalization. The correlation between the total number of initiatives appearing on state election ballots since state adoption of the process and the number of initiatives appearing on state election ballots during the period 1970–92 is 0.92. The total number of initiatives appearing on state election ballots over time correlates with average annual use of the process in the last two decades at 0.81. Average annual usage of the process from 1970 to 1992 correlates with average annual usage of the process since adoption of the process at 0.97.

³⁸ Following Hero and Tolbert, 'A Racial/Ethnic Diversity Interpretation of Politics and Policy in the States of the US', an index of state minority diversity was created from 1996 Current Population Survey data (US Census) on the percent Latino, black, white and Asian American in each state. The index is a measure of a state's racial and ethnic population and was computed with the following formula: Minority diversity = $1 - [(\text{proportion Latino})^2 + (\text{proportion black})^2 + (\text{proportion white})^2 + (\text{proportion Asian})^2]$.

³⁹ Hero, *Faces of Inequality*.

⁴⁰ California also experienced a severe statewide recession that did not cycle through the national US economy and Republican party leaders were charged with playing the 'race card' during the early 1990s (Schrag, *Paradise Lost*).

⁴¹ Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes'.

components. The first, internal efficacy, refers to one's beliefs about their ability to participate in politics. The second, external efficacy, refers to beliefs about government responsiveness to public demands or one's political influence on government.⁴² Here, we focus exclusively on external efficacy because the passage of ballot initiatives targeted at minority groups is likely to have the most significant impact on minority views of government responsiveness, rather than altering one's confidence in their ability to participate in politics.⁴³

The dependent variable measures external efficacy or government responsiveness. The NES surveys include two questions that asked respondents (1) 'if people like [them] have any say in what government does,' and (2) if they 'think that government officials care about what people like [them] think.' The variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale and indicate increased external efficacy as the scale increases. The scores from these two questions were added to obtain an overall measure of external efficacy.⁴⁴

A number of individual level variables were used to control for demographic and attitudinal factors. Since we are specifically interested in whether ballot initiatives have a stigmatizing impact on Latinos, we create separate dummy variables for Latino, black or Asian American respondents, with whites (non-Latino) as the reference group. To create the Latino variable, data were merged from two survey questions – one asking the respondent to identify his/her race, and the other asking if the respondent was of Hispanic origin. The NES surveys included a large enough sample of Latinos, blacks and Asian Americans to allow for separate analysis of groups. This differs from Bowler and Donovan who considered only 'non-white' respondents (white versus black, Asian American, Native American), grouping Latinos with whites.⁴⁵ We also include a control for the racial/ethnic context of the state, or density of state minority populations (as discussed above).

Because numerous studies find that perceptions of the economy influence attitudes about government responsiveness,⁴⁶ an attitudinal factor related to the economy was included. Perceptions of the national economy were measured by variables in which higher scores reflect worse economic evaluations. A retrospective evaluation of the state economy question was not asked in a number of the surveys and was thus excluded. A seven-point Likert scale measures partisanship with possible responses ranging from 1 = strong Democrat to 7 = strong Republican. A series of dummy variables is used to account for political attitudes, including strong Democrat, strong Republican and pure independents. We also control for age (measured in years), education measured on a seven-point scale and a dummy variable for female respondent. Additionally, dummy variables for election years are included, due to the pooling of mid-term and presidential elections, with 1988 as the baseline (reference) year.

We use interaction terms between the race/ethnicity of the respondent and the state environment in which the respondent lives to test whether racial and ethnic minorities have reduced political efficacy under direct democracy institutions. An interaction term is

⁴² R. Neimi, S. Craig and F. Mattei, 'Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study', *American Political Science Review*, 85 (1991), 1407–13.

⁴³ Future research may explore the impact of state racial and institutional environments on internal efficacy of whites and racial/ethnic minorities.

⁴⁴ See Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes', for similar measurement of the dependent variables.

⁴⁵ Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes'.

⁴⁶ M. Lewis-Beck and T. Rice, *Forecasting Elections* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1992).

created by multiplying whether a respondent is a black or Latino by frequency of initiative use.

FINDINGS: THE EFFECTS OF STATE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS ON POLITICAL EFFICACY

Is there an effect of state institutional and social contexts on political efficacy? Table 1 presents the coefficients from the primary equation, regressing the index of external efficacy on frequency of state initiative use, state racial and ethnic diversity, divided government in the state, and several individual-level characteristics. The dependent variable is coded so that higher scores are associated with a more efficacious response. Since external efficacy is an ordinal variable, ordered logistic regression coefficients are reported.⁴⁷ The model of citizen attitudes includes independent variables for direct democracy and state racial diversity, as well separate coefficients (dummy variables) for Latino, black or Asian American respondents, with non-Hispanic whites as the reference (omitted) group. A variable for whether the respondent is a resident of California is also included.

With a more nuanced measure of initiative use than employed in previous studies, we find strong evidence that citizens living in states with frequent exposure to direct democracy are more likely to claim that government is responsive to their needs, after controlling for other factors. This is consistent with earlier research which drew on survey data from only one year (1992).⁴⁸ The coefficient for frequency of initiative use is positive and statistically significant across survey questions over the ten-year time period. Citizens with more exposure to ballot initiatives are more likely to perceive that 'people like me have a say about what the government does', and are more likely to claim that 'public officials care about what people like me think'. Given the extended time frame, large sample size and extensive control variables this is strong evidence that direct legislation may improve citizen attitudes about government responsiveness.

At the same time, Table 1 indicates that regardless of state institutional context, African Americans have lower political efficacy than whites, after controlling for other factors.⁴⁹ African Americans have significantly lower scores on the overall index of external efficacy than do whites. This finding is consistent with other research on race/ethnicity in American politics. Similarly, Asian Americans report lower levels of external efficacy than do whites. In contrast, Latinos report similar levels of confidence in government responsiveness as do white non-Hispanics, consistent with recent survey data examining Latino political behaviour.⁵⁰

Among the other individual-level variables, there is a significant, negative relationship between economic attitudes and external efficacy. Strong Republican partisans are more efficacious than independents or those with only weak partisanship, consistent with

⁴⁷ Bowler and Donovan, 'Popular Control of Referendum Agendas', used OLS regression rather than ordered logistic regression, but the two statistical techniques result in comparable findings.

⁴⁸ Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes'.

⁴⁹ Blacks have an average score on the overall index of external efficacy of 5.66, compared to 6.01 for other racial groups (whites, Asian Americans and Native Americans) out of a possible 10. The difference is statistically significant in a simple bivariate analysis ($t = -5.52, p < 0.000$).

⁵⁰ R. O. de la Garza, L. DeSipio, F. C. Garcia, J. Garcia and A. Falcon, *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992); Baldassare, *California in the New Millennium*.

TABLE 1 *Impact of Direct Democracy and State Racial Diversity on Attitudes about Government Responsiveness, 1988–98*

Variables	External Efficacy Index	
	β (s.e.)	$p > z $
<i>State Environmental Factors</i>		
Freq. of Initiative Use	0.061 (0.032)	0.05
Divided Government	– 0.033 (0.060)	0.58
Racial and Ethnic Diversity	– 0.082 (0.152)	0.59
California Resident	– 0.152 (0.147)	0.30
<i>Individual Factors</i>		
Strong Democrat	0.073 (0.052)	0.16
Strong Republican	0.325 (0.059)	0.00
Pure Independent	– 0.251 (0.065)	0.00
National Economy Worse	– 0.114 (0.014)	0.00
Age	– 0.007 (0.001)	0.00
Female	0.028 (0.038)	0.46
Black	– 0.183 (0.062)	0.00
Asian American	– 0.292 (0.169)	0.08
Latino	0.176 (0.105)	0.47
Education	0.252 (0.012)	0.00
<i>Year</i>		
1990	– 0.577 (0.062)	0.00
1992	0.326 (0.074)	0.00
1994	– 0.823 (0.063)	0.00
1996	– 0.557 (0.065)	0.00
1998	– 0.443 (0.069)	0.00
LR χ^2 (19)	1,072.074	0.00
Pseudo R^2	0.11	
N	8,783	

Source: Pooled NES Post-election Study, Inter-University Consortium for Social and Political Research, Ann Arbor for 1988–98. *Unstandardized ordered logistic regression* coefficients are shown, with standard errors in parentheses. Probabilities estimated with a two-tailed test. Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at a 90 per cent confidence interval or more. Approximate percentages of racial/ethnic groups in the total sample of 9,737 is 1,211 Blacks (12.4 per cent), 123 Asians (1.3 per cent), and 370 Latinos (3.8 per cent). As outlined in the text, the addition of interaction terms for Latino \times frequency of ballot use as for black \times frequency of ballot use produced non-significant coefficients in both cases.

previous research. Also, higher education is consistently associated with better perceptions of government responsiveness. After controlling for other factors, there is no difference in political efficacy between men and women. There is an inverse relationship between age and external efficacy, which may be explained by the fact that the elderly tend to be more attentive to politics and affected by negative portrayals of government in the media.

There is no evidence, however, that either whites or minorities living in states with high racial and ethnic diversity have lower levels of external efficacy than those living in states with less diversity. Our hypothesis that social context affects confidence in government is not supported by the data. Divided government in the state also does not appear to affect

attitudes regarding government responsiveness. The findings from the California dummy variable, included to measure 'California exceptionalism', in which ballot initiatives provide an important form of policy making *and* (non-Hispanic) whites comprise a minority of the state's population, was also not statistically significant. Thus there is no effect from living in California, compared with other states, on external efficacy. The findings put into context recent survey data from California showing high levels of distrust of government.⁵¹ The signs for the year dummy variables are consistent with fluctuations that might be expected given changes from mid-term to presidential elections, with increased efficacy reported in presidential election years.

Analysis (not reported in tabular form) was conducted using interaction terms to examine whether racial and ethnic minorities experience reduced external efficacy under direct democracy institutions. The interaction terms were used to test whether ballot initiatives have a stigmatizing effect on racial and ethnic minorities, leading to lower political efficacy. Two separate interaction terms model the effect of exposure to ballot initiatives on the external efficacy of Latino and black respondents. The control variables are the same as reported in Table 1. Using survey data for one year (1992), Bowler and Donovan found partial evidence that non-whites in states with frequent exposure to direct democracy may in fact have lower political efficacy.⁵² But their measure of non-whites did not include Latinos, and blacks comprise the largest racial minority in the NES surveys. It is less surprising, then, that after controlling for other factors, neither interaction term was statistically significant. Latinos residing in states with frequent exposure to ballot initiatives did not report lower external efficacy than Latinos living in states without direct democracy. The same result was found for the interaction term between black respondent and frequency of initiative use. While we hypothesized that frequently used direct democracy would have the most detrimental impact on Latinos,⁵³ the evidence does not support this hypothesis. There is evidence that use of direct democracy is associated with positive perceptions of government overall, but blacks have less confidence in government responsiveness than whites.

CONCLUSION

This study has considered the impact of direct democracy and racial context on attitudes to government responsiveness. We find evidence to indicate state-level institutions may contribute to American democracy by instilling a greater sense that citizens have the ability to shape what their governments do. The evidence also suggests direct democracy did not have the hypothesized detrimental impact on racial and ethnic group attitudes towards government in general. Regardless of state environmental contexts, African Americans and Asian Americans have less confidence in government responsiveness than whites and Latinos. Since political efficacy is an important predictor of broader political participation, reduced efficacy among blacks and Asian Americans may affect turnout rates and representation in the political process. Despite being the most frequent 'losers' in California initiative elections directly targeting minority groups,⁵⁴ Latinos have similar confidence in government to white non-Hispanics.

⁵¹ Baldassare, *California in the New Millennium*.

⁵² Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes'.

⁵³ Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, 'Minorities and Direct Legislation'.

⁵⁴ Hajnal, Gerber and Louch, 'Minorities and Direct Legislation'; R. O. de la Garza, A. Falcon and F. C. Garcia, 'Will the Real Americans Please Stand Up: Anglo and Mexican-American Support for Core American Political Values', *American Journal of Political Science*, 40 (1996), 335–51.

The analysis provides little support for social (racial/ethnic) context, but rather strong evidence that institutional context effects political efficacy. While racial and ethnic minorities exhibit lower levels of efficacy than whites (with the exception of Latinos), it does not appear to be the result of exposure to stigmatizing ballot measures. The findings add to our understanding of direct democracy in addressing previously understudied questions concerning efficacy and minority voices, which have not been addressed in earlier studies.

Additionally, because we rely on a nationwide sample of respondents from the fifty states over a ten-year time period, the analysis not only contrasts initiative against non-initiative states, but a largely legislative process against a process consisting of both initiatives and representative institutions. The data suggest citizens have more positive views of American democracy when governed by both ballot initiatives and legislatures. Rather than two systems, there is one, that of referendum democracy, which emphasizes a connection between direct and representative institutions.⁵⁵ The beneficial effects of direct democracy generally on citizen attitudes towards government responsiveness support previous research conducted by Bowler and Donovan based on one year.⁵⁶

How might we explain African American and Asian Americans' more negative attitudes towards government? If the legislative process is already seen as acting against minority interests, the addition of direct democracy to that system will probably not make the minority community feel less efficacious. This may well be the case. Despite the non-findings about social context, the research raises broader questions about race and ethnicity and the politics of democratic inclusion, as filtered through the various structures of American politics, beyond the policy outcomes issues previously studied.⁵⁷ The issues and evidence considered here thus have importance for assessments of political processes, institutions and substantive outcomes and, ultimately, for the quality of democracy in America. The findings may also be relevant in considering democracy and the processes, institutions and racial factors in other political systems.

⁵⁵ See M. Mendelsohn and A. Parkin, eds, *Referendum Democracy: Citizens, Elites, and Deliberation in Referendum Campaigns* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵⁶ Bowler and Donovan, 'Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes'.

⁵⁷ Hero, *Faces of Inequality*.