
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Selling Prop 30

Original Reporting | By Meade Klingensmith | Elections, State government, Taxes

Dec. 5, 2012 — In ratifying Proposition 30 last month, California voters seem to have signaled that support for a tax increase is not political suicide in *all* circumstances. But to what extent does the marketing of the measure — a ballot initiative that raises taxes on annual income greater than \$250,000 — provide a model for others to be successful in raising revenue for a spectrum of needed government services? Interviews with many of those involved in the campaign for Proposition 30, as well as conversations with independent observers, revealed five messaging techniques that appear to have resonated with voters. Nevertheless, the compromises that some tax-increase supporters had to make, along with Governor Jerry Brown's singular focus on the Proposition as a needed response to a unique crisis, meant broader arguments about the need for more robust government services in general did not receive as much attention and were not as fully tested as they could have been.

A national bellwether?

California, like much of the nation, has been dominated by an anti-tax mentality for the last 30 years. [Many point to the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978](#) — a California ballot measure that limited all real estate taxes in California to 1 percent of the full cash value of any given property — as the beginning of a nationwide “taxpayer revolt.” According to Fred Glass, the communications director for the California Federation of Teachers, a statewide teachers union, “the conservatives completely spooked the Democrats over this period of time. Democrats thought they couldn't talk about taxes. The conservatives made it seem as if the word ‘taxes’ was toxic, and everybody stayed away from it.”

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Despite this anti-tax history, California voters approved [Proposition 30](#) (“Prop 30”) by more than a 10-point margin. The measure steepened the progressivity of California's marginal tax rate, increasing the rate anywhere from 1 percent on taxable income between \$250,000 and \$300,000 to 3 percent on taxable income of at least \$500,000 (since the pre- Prop 30 rate on taxable income above \$1 million had, at 10.3 percent, been 1 percent higher than the rate for any other bracket, the 3 percent increase to 13.3 percent meant that the tax treatment of such income remained in a class by itself). Prop 30 also increased the state sales tax to 7.50 percent from 7.25 percent. The high-earner income tax increase will automatically expire in seven years; the sales tax increase in four. All revenues will go directly to public education, with 89 percent earmarked for elementary and secondary schools and 11 percent for community colleges.

Citing California’s historic status as a national bellwether for state fiscal policy direction, California advocates for increased government services and the revenues to pay for them are hopeful the passage of Prop 30, like the passage of Proposition 13 before it, represents a turning point in the national mood around taxes — this time in the direction of greater acceptance of the idea that taxes are vital to the successful functioning of government.

HOW “YES ON 30” ADS MADE THE CASE

In a typical advertisement from the “Yes on 30” campaign, teachers and principals, identified by name, made a personal appeal to viewers: “As teachers, the last four years have been devastating for our schools and colleges. 30 thousand teachers laid off. Music and art programs: gone. Double-digit tuition hikes. Prop 30 stops the cuts. [Prop 30] will restore funding for our schools and colleges and prevent billions in new cuts.”

The state controller then appeared, announcing that “with strict accountability, money must go to the classroom and can’t be touched by Sacramento politicians.”

Governor Brown, surrounded by cheering children in a school gym, closed by saying, “For the students and for California’s future, vote yes on 30.”

Fred Glass, however, warned that Prop 30 will only become a turning point if Democrats and progressives through the country consistently recognize it as such. “If in other states and other places people don’t do what we did because they’re still afraid, then it will be a one-time deal.”

Remapping Debate spoke with many of the individuals who helped develop the various messaging tactics used on Prop 30’s behalf. We found five key messaging techniques as well as the concern, as Sabrina Smith, the deputy director of California Calls, a progressive coalition of community-based organizations and other partners, put it, that “there is a real tension between messaging to win campaigns, and messaging that fundamentally changes public perception over the long-term.”

Technique 1: Make the need real

Dan Newman, a partner at SCN Strategies, the firm that ran Governor Brown’s “Yes on 30” campaign, believes the first key to Prop 30’s success was that voters had a visceral sense of the need for more revenue.

“People were living it,” he told Remapping Debate. “Students had been paying double digit tuition hikes...Class sizes were among the biggest in the country. Arts and music classes were just eliminated. They’d seen good teachers be laid off. Summer vacation kept getting extended.” The need for revenue was “an absolute concrete thing that [voters] got, they understood. They really felt it tangibly.” Newman’s firm designed advertising that reminded people of this need (see sidebar entitled “How ‘Yes on 30’ ads made the case”).

Mark Baldassare, the president and chief executive officer of the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California, agreed. He believes the decision to tie the tax increase to education funding was “hugely important” because “the one area where voters are least likely to want to see cuts in state spending [is] schools.” (California’s budget had been structured such that the passage of Prop 30 was the only way to avoid triggering automatic cuts to state education funding. This structure created a real sense of danger and urgency in the electorate.)

Technique 2: Explain the tax clearly

Fred Glass believes that as long as there is a real need, people are likely to support a tax if campaigns clearly and simply communicate “who the tax is on, what the tax is for, how much it is, and the benefits it would bring to everybody.” Prop 30 contained two different taxes — the progressive income tax and the sales tax. Each tax required a different strategy.

The most successful messaging strategy for the income tax proved to be emphasizing three factors: that it would only affect the wealthy; that it accounted for 90 percent of the revenue generated by Prop 30; and that income-inequality had grown so severe that the wealthy had a moral responsibility to contribute more.

Glass said that the California Federation of Teachers tested a number of different tax measures before negotiating with Governor Brown to create Prop 30. Its original idea, a “1 percent on the 1 percent” income tax on the wealthiest Californians, achieved 73 percent approval in test polling, though the Federation decided to discard it after determining that it did not raise enough revenue. A sales tax with no progressive element only garnered 44 percent approval in test polling. From these results, Glass and his colleagues concluded that progressive income taxes have much more public support than regressive taxes, and therefore that Brown’s Prop 30 messaging needed to focus on the fact that the measure was primarily a tax on the wealthy. “Once people understand that, they’re much more likely to vote for it.”

The California Federation of Teachers saw the need to focus on the fact that the measure was primarily a tax on the wealthy. “Once people understand that,” said Fred Glass, CFT’s communications director, “they’re much more likely to vote for it.”

According to Glass, Brown resisted this message at first, perhaps out of a concern about alienating business-oriented supporters, but embraced it in the final three weeks of the campaign in which he held a statewide blitz of rallies at colleges, community centers, and union halls. (For an example of the messaging in a typical speech from this period, see [“Brown on the stump”](#)). Glass credits this reversal with turning the tide in Prop 30’s favor — before those final three weeks, polls had shown that approval for the measure had dropped to 48 percent.

The sales tax component of Proposition 30 called for a different approach. Brown’s campaign tried to make the sales tax less frightening, Dan Newman said, by showing that, in context, “it’s not very much.” Throughout the campaign, Newman continued, Brown repeated that the tax amounted to “an extra penny on a four-dollar sandwich.”

Technique 3: Prove accountability

“We knew voters wanted to support schools...they understood the dire fiscal straits our schools were in. So then the main threshold question that they had was, ‘Will this really help our schools?’” said Newman. “They can’t feel as if their taxes are just going down a black hole.”

Did Prop 30 need to have a sunset?

Fred Glass, communications director for the California Federation of Teachers, along with his union, said the CFT fought for the tax to be permanent when it negotiated the measure with Governor Brown, but, as Glass told Remapping Debate, “the governor was insistent upon [a temporary increase]. I think that he thought it was necessary, and I’m not sure whether it was for the public or for his more conservative partners in the initiative, such as the business community.” While CFT and its partners successfully negotiated with Gov. Brown for a longer sunset for the income tax provision than the governor had originally supported (as well as a smaller sales tax with a quicker sunset), Glass remains worried that California will be faced with another crisis when Prop 30 expires in seven years.

When asked why Brown insisted on the sunset provision, campaign strategist Dan Newman replied, “It’s both politics and policy. It’s always easier to stomach a temporary tax, but it’s also the right thing to do policy-wise...it’s widely considered good public policy not to be overly reliant on just the highest income taxpayers, because then you can get the boom and bust cycles that we’ve suffered through where the California budget can be overly tied to the stock market.”

Would have passed without a sunset. Glass, who acknowledged that his union never tested the question, was nevertheless confident that it would have? Mark Baldassare, the president and chief executive officer of the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California, by contrast, was uncertain because a proposition without a sunset “may have generated a different opposition campaign.” Newman was more in Glass’ camp. Although not having a sunset would “shave off a couple points of support,” he said, given Prop 30’s wide margin of victory, a permanent version of the measure might feasibly have passed anyway.

Newman said Brown’s campaign made a point of informing voters that Prop 30 was only a stopgap measure, the first step in what must be an ongoing process. “[Brown] was always clear that Prop 30 is not a panacea, it’s not some magic solution that’s going to make it rain money for the rest of time in California...It’s something that puts us back on stable footing and allows us the foundation to move forward again.”

To reassure voters, Newman said, his team employed two approaches. First, it used advertising to inform voters that the revenue from Prop 30 “went into a special account for schools and that there would be regular audits that would be posted online.”

Second, it relied on Brown’s personal status as what Newman called a “trusted messenger” with a long-term reputation for having a frugal lifestyle. Brown burnished that reputation for frugality upon returning to office in 2011 by taking [48,000 cell phones](#) and [7,500 “non-essential” cars](#) away from state employees in all state agencies and departments; by vetoing a budget for the first time in California history “because it relied on the old duct tape and gimmicks”; and by pushing for draconian budget cuts.

Willie Pelote, a senior political and legislative director of the California branch of AFSCME International, a major union for public sector workers that supported Prop 30, agreed that the cuts made by Brown played an important role in earning the trust of voters. “A lot of people wanted Jerry [Brown] to come in here and talk about how he was going to restore funding...But he came in here and made hard choices that hurt a lot people,” he said. Pelote argued that by cutting spending before asking for more revenue, Brown demonstrated that “there’s no fat here” and made voters more likely to support higher taxes.

Reclaim California’s Future ran a “parallel campaign” that focused on messages of aspiration and hope, including “funding our future” and “setting up our families to succeed.” — Sabrina Smith, California Calls

Technique 4: Timing

Two elements of timing appear to have played an important role in the success of Prop 30: the decision to put the measure on the ballot during a presidential election year, and the decision to run a relatively reserved campaign until the blitz of the final three weeks.

Mark Baldassare of the Public Policy Institute of California noted that “putting [Prop 30] on the general election ballot in a presidential year was huge...The electorate that will turn out for a presidential election is much different from the electorate in an off-year election.” Specifically, voter turnout among three groups who tend to have greater-than-average liberal leanings — young people, minorities, and poor people — is higher in presidential as opposed to off-year elections.

Willie Pelote believes that the timing of the campaign’s statewide promotional blitz in the final three weeks before the election was also important, since that was the period when “voters are paying the most attention...This was a great campaign. I think I got my first piece of mail three weeks out.” Pelote contrasted this approach with the more traditional campaigns run by his union, which he said usually start between six and nine months in advance.

Though quick to point out that Brown’s approach will not work for all types of campaigns and should not be seen as a universal model, Pelote nevertheless praised its effectiveness. “What they did was make sure that they had done all of the appropriate research, make sure that everything had been properly tested, and then when there’s a window that opens when the voters are more focused on the work at hand before the deadline for them to participate, they launched their campaign. The timing couldn’t have been better. It was impeccable.”

Technique 5: “Parallel campaigns”

Though Brown’s primary “Yes on 30” campaign relied heavily on a crisis-response narrative, other organizations ran what Sabrina Smith of California Calls refers to as “parallel campaigns.” “Reclaim California’s Future” was the principal progressive grassroots coalition in support of Prop 30. California Calls and the California Federation of Teachers were both partners in the coalition.

According to Smith, the coalition felt that the Brown campaign’s crisis messaging would largely appeal to “swing and moderate voters” while overlooking the members of demographic groups that often stay home on election day. In response, Reclaim California’s Future ran a “parallel campaign” that targeted members of those demographic groups — young people, the poor, and members of minority groups — with messages of aspiration and hope. Their messaging, Smith said, focused on the ideas of “funding our future,” “getting us back on track,” and “setting up our families to succeed.” Fred Glass characterized the campaign similarly, saying it sought to ask the question, “What kind of state do we want to live in? Do we want our children to live in?”

This “parallel campaign” was not as visible to the casual observer as the primary Brown campaign because the parallel campaign did not extensively advertise. Rather, it operated an extensive program of phone banking, door-to-door canvassing, and get-out-the-vote operations. Smith reported that Reclaim California’s Future contacted 666,202 voters, identified 490,344 who said they would vote “yes” on Prop 30, and re-contacted nearly 150,000 of those individuals in the days leading up to the election to encourage them to vote. California Calls also left 26,679 door hangers, which were among “several thousand” more left by the organization’s allies. Fred Glass added that the coalition’s efforts delivered “at least a quarter million voters that [they were] sure of, and maybe more.” Smith’s research shows that in closely contested California ballot initiatives held over the last fifteen years “the margin of difference...is somewhere between 200,000 and 600,000 votes.” Reclaim California’s Future asserted, therefore, that it played an important role in Proposition 30’s victory. Both Glass and Smith felt that aspirational messaging was the key to reaching voters from groups with traditionally lower-than-average turnout.

When asked whether aspirational messaging would be as effective when seeking to reach a broader population, as on California Calls' target constituencies, Smith did warn that there are voters who will not respond to aspirational messaging, particularly those that are "driven by values that are more fear-based and cynical." Nevertheless, her view is that "aspirational messages can cut across multiple audiences" and do so successfully.

In [Part 2 of this article](#), we look at the potential pitfalls of "crisis marketing" and the ways that aspirational messaging can be made to resonate.

Corrections:

This article has been edited (Dec. 5, 2012) to modify the first sentence of the third paragraph of the "Did Prop 30 need to have a sunset?" box in order to remove the incorrect suggestion that all interviewees referenced in the paragraph were supporters of Prop 30. That same box has been edited (Dec. 6, 2012) to make clear that Fred Glass, the communications director for the California Federation of Teachers was not himself personally involved in the CFT's negotiations with Governor Brown.

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