

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Q: Politics in California has some unique features, one of which is “direct democracy.” What does this term mean?

Direct democracy can take many forms, but initiative, referendum and recall are the most familiar and the most debated. In his text, “California Initiatives and Referendums 1912-1990,” the author, John Allswang, begins with an important insight: “It is very unlikely that direct democracy would have been part of California progressivism were it not for one man, John Randolph Haynes.”

The author notes that Dr. Haynes shared with others a suspicion and a concern about the political power of big business. In the early days of Los Angeles, that power was best exemplified by the influence of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Southern Pacific (SP) had provided Los Angeles in 1876 with its first rail link to the eastern United States (via San Francisco). These concerns had a solid foundation; SP had dominated local Los Angeles politics for decades, with heavy lobbying in both Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

California voters took a first step in support of “direct democracy” when they voted in 1902 for a constitutional amendment permitting cities like Los Angeles to amend their charters by initiative. These changes later helped Los Angeles to prevent SP from maintaining its control over land and infrastructure in Los Angeles.

In the present day, direct democracy continues to serve an important role. The process has become far more sophisticated, with complex proposals and paid workers gathering signatures, financed by advocacy organizations with very large budgets. Now more than ever, these increased responsibilities challenge voters to become and remain informed and engaged.

CITATION

Author:
Allswang, John M.

Title:
California Initiatives and Referendums, 1912-1990: a survey and guide to research

Year: 1991

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The Haynes Foundation and Urban Reform Philanthropy in Los Angeles

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