



The Colorado
Health Foundation™

BALLOT MEASURES: REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Executive Summary

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Colorado is one of only 14 states that allow citizen-led initiatives to go directly on the ballot. In 2016, the Colorado ballot included numerous local and statewide ballot measures, which required substantial work, including coalition-building, fundraising and advocacy efforts. The 2016 election cycle created an opportunity to evaluate and learn how advocates can successfully use ballot measures as a tool for changing policy. In response to this opportunity, the Colorado Health Foundation worked with Vantage Evaluation to examine what advocates learned through the ballot measure life cycle by focusing on the following six case studies:

- **Amendment 70: Minimum Wage**

Proposed increasing the state's minimum wage.

Status: *PASSED*

- **Amendment 69: ColoradoCare**

Proposed establishing a statewide program to provide universal health care coverage for Colorado residents.

Status: *FAILED*

- **Boulder Sugary Drink Tax 2H**

Proposed a 2 cent per ounce excise tax on the distribution of beverages with at least five grams of added caloric sweeteners per 12 fluid ounces within the City of Boulder. Revenue would be used to support health promotion, general wellness programs and chronic disease prevention.

Status: *PASSED*

- **Amendment 72: Tobacco Tax**

Proposed increasing the state tobacco tax per pack of 20 cigarettes by \$1.75 and a similar increase to other tobacco products.

Status: *FAILED*

- **Larimer County Behavioral Health Tax Issue 1A**

Proposed a 0.25 percent sales tax in Larimer County for 25 years to fund the purchase of land and construction of a 51,000-square-foot facility to provide acute behavioral health treatment, substance abuse detox and treatment, and intensive residential treatment.

Status: *FAILED*

- **Colorado Priorities Fiscal Reform**

Proposed allowing the state to keep any revenue over the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR) cap until 2026.

Status: *BALLOT MEASURE WASN'T SUBMITTED*

Lessons Learned Across Ballot Measures

The Ballot Measures: Elections and Lessons Learned report highlights key themes that influence the outcomes of ballot measure campaigns, including: ballot development, governance, funding, campaign messaging, grassroots involvement, implementation and influencing factors. This executive summary highlights some key success drivers shared across all ballot measures.

Ballot Development

The way a ballot measure is developed matters. Coalitions are most successful when:

A ballot measure is the right tool for the issue

- Ballot measures can be an expensive and time-consuming political change tool, but they are ideal for policies that require tax increases in Colorado and invoke TABOR.
- TABOR requires a citizen vote.
- Ballot measures also allow for quick change, affording situations with smaller windows of opportunity a way to implement policy.

They are systematic and transparent about why they are proposing the measure

- Campaigns need to use policy research (e.g., document and policy reviews) and political opinion research (e.g., polling, focus groups) to ensure that the policy resonates with the public and creates a strong case for the change.
- Campaigns with more transparent vetting and information-sharing processes build better buy-in among coalition members and funders and in turn better prepare them to face opposition.

Language is carefully constructed to prevent opposition challenges

- The details of ballot language are key entry points for oppositional challenges to a campaign. The easiest way for the opposition to target a campaign is through the ballot measure's language.
- Opposition campaigns may exploit weaknesses in the policy language to develop counter messages or contest the legality of a measure before it is approved.

Available financing matches the resources of likely opposition

- Policies that challenge the resources of big corporations should be prepared to face legal challenges for impeding the approval of the ballot.
- Large corporations can also bring in national dollars to support their opposition, so having quick access to additional funds in a time of need is essential.

The benefits of early filing for a title are weighed against the downsides

- Strategic considerations must be given to the timing of submitting and approving ballot language.
- While early approval of one's ballot measure creates a competitive advantage for securing resources, it also gives the opposition more time to shape its "No" campaign.

Governance

A coalition's governance structure impacts the success of ballot measures. Effective structures feature:

Strategically segmented levels of involvement

- Governance structures that segment levels of involvement and power into three areas increase a campaign's access to human and financial capital.

For example:

- An executive committee, with the most decision-making power and highest expectations for contributing resources
 - A steering committee, with some inclusion in the decision-making process and some expectations for contributing resources
 - A broader committee, community members and organizations who generally support the campaign's purpose
- The fast nature of campaigns creates a natural gravitation toward centralizing power and simpler structures, typically having only two committees and limited engagement with those not in the executive committee. The lack of engagement reduces involvement from a broader array of constituents.

Clearly defined skills and expectations of coalition members

- Campaigns that pause to intentionally consider setting expectations create stronger cohesion among coalition members.
- Interest, experience and sympathy for a cause are important, but more is needed to set up a successful campaign.

- Executive committee members need to bring in a host of different capacities, including policy expertise, campaigning knowledge, fundraising skills and networks.
- Taking time to vet coalition members helps campaigns succeed.

Diverse and representative coalition members

- Although it takes significant time and many discussions to engage multiple perspectives, campaigns are more effective when coalitions involve members with diverse backgrounds and members who represent those affected by the issue the ballot measure is trying to solve.
- Arising frustrations can strain campaigns, but they also create a grassroots base to support the implementation of successful ballots. Taking time to agree on common values increases the likelihood that broad or diverse coalition groups will succeed.

Multidirectional communication

- Campaigns that use multidirectional forms of communication (up-down, down-up, lateral) increase buy-in across time, making those campaigns more resistant to opposition forces, as well as the strain of engaging in campaigns.

Effective use of external consultants

- Campaigns that effectively use external technical consultants have more positive outcomes.
- Executive committees that trust experts to do their job are better managers.
- Also, different technical consultants are useful at specific stages of the campaign. For example, when developing a ballot measure, some 2016 campaigns hired policy analysts, pollsters and legal advisors to reduce problems that arose in relation to language, which served as an effective defense against opposition.
- During the campaign, media consultants, communication consultants and fundraising experts help build structure and articulate messages related to ballot measures. Some campaigns hire communication consultants to monitor which messages are successful.

Funding

Ballot measures require a lot of money. Funding should be:

Available

- Lack of funds compound other issues during the life cycle of a ballot measure. Without adequate funding, it is difficult to make strategic decisions, campaigns are less able to react to external forces and it is harder to leverage funds from other donors.

Infused consistently throughout a campaign

- While almost all campaigns want early funds, consistent infusion of funds throughout the campaign matters more.
- Securing early funds help campaigns plan and make strategic decisions, but secured commitments can fall through.
- Campaigns need funds at all the following key stages: developing the ballot measure, gathering signatures and building public awareness of the issue leading up to the campaign. Not having any funds at the end of a campaign is far more detrimental than struggling midway through.

Diversified

- Campaigns that diversify their revenue streams (local cash, national cash and in-kind resources such as hours volunteered) increase their financial well-being and reduce costs through hours donated by committee members and grassroots groups.

Informed by ongoing research

- Knowing the amount of funds needed in advance is difficult for campaigns.
- Continuing to use research (focus groups, polling, policy analyses) to develop a budget and using polling over the course of the campaign helps keep a pulse on how much more money needs to be raised.
- The types of questions that the 2016 campaigns researched during ballot development included (1) the cost of similar campaigns, (2) an estimation of how strong the opposition will fight given the type of change proposed and (3) the external climate (especially in a presidential election year).

Campaign Messaging

Strong campaign messages increased the likelihood of success. Campaign messages should be:

Tested

- Using policy and public opinion research to test campaigns' targeted messages helps ensure that the messages resonate with the intended audience, whether the intended audience is supportive voters (motivating them to go to the polls and vote) or swing voters (engaging them on the issue).

Targeted

- Strategically thinking about what types of messages to use affects the public's goodwill toward the campaign, keeping in mind that the best message may change throughout the campaign.
- Crafting initial messages so they are simple and lighthearted increases their appeal to voters.
- Then, if faced with significant oppositional force, and only after the public knows the ballot measure's positive purpose, campaign tactics can pivot to attack mode and expose something negative in the opposition's strategy, for example, exposing the fact that a large corporation is using nationally raised funds to influence local issues.

Multimodal, emphasizing social media

- Campaigns that use multiple media (e.g., TV, paid social media, paid digital media, print media and mail) to reach their targeted audience are more effective. With the rise of social media, 2016 campaigns found that outreach through billboards, mail and flyers was less effective than digital and TV ads.

Well-Funded

- Campaign messaging requires ample funds. The lack of funds may result in messages that do not reach the target audience; the wrong choice of medium to share that message; or discontinued campaign messaging, which creates a big vacuum for the opposition to fill.

Grassroots Involvement

Grassroots support is an important resource to spread campaign messages. Specifically, grassroots support can:

Leverage broad networks to spread campaign messages

- Effectively building grassroots support can significantly reduce cost as these supporters can help get out the vote and reduce the funds needed to spread the campaign message.
- Using grassroots support also increases buy-in from groups affected by the issues of the measure.
- Likewise, grassroots organizations have large networks that can be leveraged by the campaign to raise support and funding. Investing in grassroots organizations also builds an infrastructure for future campaigns.

Enables effective implementation

- Not investing in grassroots organizations reduces local buy-in for supporting the implementation of the policy. When policies are attacked by exemptions, the lack of a local grassroots watchdog group leaves the policy more vulnerable to reverting or not being fully realized.

Is best suited for campaigns demanding on-the-ground outreach

- Engaging only grassroots is an effective strategy when campaigns require less on-the-ground outreach. For example, “No” campaigns, which are easier to win as few ballot measures pass, often require less need to build public awareness.

Implementation

The effort does not end on Election Day. Campaigns should consider:

How early decisions impact implementation difficulty

- Crafting a strong, well-researched ballot measure whose implementation process will be systematically absorbed by a regulatory agency (e.g., a specific state agency) increases the likelihood it will go into effect. Likewise, engaging a grassroots coalition over the course of the campaign creates a watchdog group for potential loopholes or implementation challenges.

Retaining resources (financial and human) for implementation

- Campaigns are tapped out by the time implementation comes around, limiting their ability to support the implementation process.
- Also, when the policy’s language is vulnerable to change, the opposition may file an exemption and try to reduce the potency of the law, requiring campaigns to legally fight the exemptions.

Influencing Factors

Key external factors can influence a campaign's ability to proceed. The campaign's reaction to these factors made the difference in some 2016 campaigns.

Pros and cons of a presidential year

- While presidential years bring voters to the polls, they also increase competition for limited resources. Funders, voters, advocacy organizations, trained campaign staff and campaign volunteers are all pulled in multiple directions. It is easy for campaigns to get lost in the mayhem and forgotten.

Responding to the opposition's tactics

- A strong opposition requires campaigns to balance their offensive and defensive strategies. The draw to react to the opposition changes how campaigns are run.
- The opposition employs different tactics at different stages. For example, during ballot measure development, the opposition uses legal tactics to stop the approval of a ballot measure.
- Defensive tactics, such as buying out canvassing or signature-gathering agencies, dramatically increase the cost of gathering signatures and, thus, the cost for the measure to make it on the ballot.
- In the final stages, the opposition works to spread a “No” public message by out-raising and outspending the “Yes” campaign.

To read the full report from which this executive summary is drawn, [Ballot Measures: Reflections and Lessons Learned – 2016 Election Cycle](#), visit the [Studies & Reports page on the Colorado Health Foundation's website](#).

About the Colorado Health Foundation

The Colorado Health Foundation is bringing health in reach for all Coloradans by engaging closely with communities across the state through investing, policy and advocacy, learning and capacity building. For more information, please visit www.coloradohealth.org.

About Vantage Evaluation

Vantage Evaluation is a Denver-based evaluation consulting firm, helping purpose-driven organizations understand what's working and what could be working better for our communities. Vantage is a team of life-long learners, dedicated to helping clients find the joy in evaluation through services that balance rigor and accessibility.