

# Big Green And Careful: How Major California Newspapers Covered Two Ballot Initiatives In The 1990 General Election

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Newspapers set the campaign agenda for two environmental initiatives appearing on California's November 1990 general election ballot. In doing so, they relied heavily upon unnamed sources (proponents, experts, environmentalists, etc.) and poorly identified advocacy groups.

Although the agricultural community perceived both ballot measures to be agricultural issues, the media defined them in a much broader, environmental context. The agricultural industry-sponsored initiative was treated as a non-issue by the newspapers. It received only five percent of the news and editorial space devoted to the two initiatives. However, pro and con coverage of each initiative was generally balanced, reflecting an overall attempt at fairness and willingness to present both sides of the issue.

## Introduction

The power of the press manifests itself in a number of different ways in the public debate of issues affecting agriculture. Newspapers, for example, influence the political knowledge and activity of their readers (Smith, 1986). They also are a main source of environmental information, which editors believe is

worthy of prominent news treatment (Atwater, 1988).

This study builds on previous gatekeeper (White, 1950; Snider, 1987), agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Williams, Shapiro and Culbirth 1983) and news source studies (Culbertson and Somerick 1977; Wulfmeyer 1983; Lasorsa and Reese 1990). It analyzes newspaper

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treatment of two major initiatives appearing on the 1990 general election ballot in California.

One of the initiatives was a complex, sweeping environmental reform issue that addressed global warming, pesticides used in agriculture, old growth redwoods, oil production and a variety of other environmental issues. Sponsors included the Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, the state attorney general, and two state assemblymen. It appeared as Proposition 128 on the ballot and was labeled "Big Green" by supporters, a label used extensively in media reports.

The second initiative was an agricultural industry-supported measure designed to counter Big Green. It proposed expansion of California's pesticide residue monitoring program for produce and processed foods, and related programs. It appeared as Proposition 135 on the ballot. Its sponsors called it CAREFUL ("Californians for Responsible Food Laws"). Some opponents referred to it as "Big Brown."

### Methodology

This study involved a content analysis of news stories and editorials about Proposition 128 and 135 that appeared in California newspapers having daily circulations greater than 150,000 during October, 1990, the month preceding the 1990 general election.

The newspapers were selected based on daily circulation figures reported in the 1990 edition of *Metro California Media*. A one-month mail subscription was obtained for each of the seven newspapers that met the circulation limitation dictated by costs and time. Editorials and news stories that pertained to Proposition 128 and 135 were clipped and analyzed with respect to length, place-

ment, author, use of graphics and information sources.

To insure coding consistency and minimize error, each clipping was analyzed independently by two coders. The two sets of coding forms were reviewed by the authors to reconcile any differences.

### Results

Seven newspapers, having a combined circulation greater than three million, met the 150,000 minimum circulation criterion imposed on the study. They are *The Sacramento Bee*, 259,500; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 560,600; *San Jose Mercury News*, 274,500; *Los Angeles Times*, 1,108,000; *Los Angeles Daily News*, 185,700; *The Orange County Register*, 343,900; and *The San Diego Union*, 268,500.

In October, these papers published 83 articles about the two initiatives, devoting a total of 2,660 column inches of space to the subject. [For purposes of the study, a column inch was defined as two inches (12 picas) wide x one inch deep (6 picas)].

Coverage of Proposition 128, Big Green, totalled 2,522 column inches, far overshadowing that for Proposition 135, CAREFUL, with 138 column inches. The articles ranged in length from five inches to 180 inches, with an average length of 32 inches. Fifty-four of the articles were news stories for a total of 1,737 inches; 28 were editorials or opinion pieces for a total of 923 inches.

Editorial and op-ed page commentary, pro and con, for Proposition 128 totalled 900 inches, compared to only 23 column inches for Proposition 135. All editorials that expressed the newspapers' positions opposed the propositions. Twenty-two specifically opposed Proposition 128; two specifically opposed

### Proposition 135.

Five guest commentary pieces favored Proposition 128. The favorable opinions usually were balanced with opposing views occupying approximately equal space. No guest commentaries were published favoring Proposition 135.

The newspapers carried 54 news stories on the ballot initiatives. They occupied 1,737 column inches. Forty were played on page one or elsewhere in the A sections of the newspapers, indicating the perceived news value of the initiatives. The complexity of the subject was indicated by the 32-column inch average length of the stories.

News coverage also focused on Proposition 128. Forty-seven stories (87%) dealt predominantly with Proposition 128, and seven stories (13%) dealt predominantly with Proposition 135.

Authors used a variety of sources for their information about Propositions 128 and 135. More than one-third of the articles - 31 of the 83 news stories and editorials studied - included attributions to unnamed sources as "opponents," "supporters," "experts," "analysts," "critics" and "environmentalists."

Twenty-three advocacy groups, both for and against the propositions, were cited as sources in 37 of the 83 articles. The National Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club each had attributions in 13 stories. The "No on 128" campaign was mentioned in 11 stories; the "Yes on 128" campaign was mentioned in seven stories.

Other advocacy groups used as sources in more than one story, included the Citizens for a Better Environment (3), California Common Cause (2), and the California League of Conservation Voters (2). Groups with one attribution each included

the Canadian Environmental Law Association, Resources of the Future, Planning and Conservation League, National Toxics Campaign, the Environmental Media Association of Culver City, California Public Interest Research Group, Alliance for Survival, Environmental Health Coalition, Lyndon LaRouche Committee, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, Western Growers Association, Committee on Sustainable Agriculture, California Council for Environment and Economic Balance, National Wildlife Federation, National Public Interest Research Group, and the California Chamber of Commerce.

State government officials, were used as sources in 25 stories. Legislators, including various legislative aides, were sources of information in 10 stories. Other state government-related sources cited in more than one story included the Legislative Analyst's Office (4), gubernatorial candidates Pete Wilson and Dianne Feinstein (4), the Water Quality Control Board (2) and the Senate Office of Research (2). Governor's spokesperson Susan Trowbridge, the California Energy Commission, and the California Department of Food and Agriculture each served as sources once.

University sources ranked only slightly below state government as sources of information with 29 attributions in 23 articles. Fifteen stories attributed information to the University of California; 14 attributed information to other universities, both inside and outside California. A Cornell University study dealing with alternatives to chemical pesticides was mentioned in five stories. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology was used as a source in three stories. Oxford, University of Texas, Purdue, and Stanford were each used

as sources in two stories. Arizona State University, Yale, Harvard, and the University of Virginia were used one time each.

Federal government sources were used 14 times in 13 stories, with the Environmental Protection Agency appearing in six stories as the most used source. The Food and Drug Administration was used as a source in three stories. Information was attributed to U.S. trade representative Carla Hills and the Congressional Budget Office in two stories each. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration was cited as a source in one story.

Agriculture-related sources were used 14 times in 10 stories. Information was attributed to ag-related businesses in five stories. Farmers and the California Farm Bureau Federation were used four times each. A commodity organization had one attribution.

Other sources of information for articles on the initiatives and the number of articles in which they were used included polls (11), local government/agencies (9), consultants (9), industry/business (6), scientific societies (4), other publications (4), banks (3), utility companies (2), and various individuals, institutes and associations (18).

Ten articles, most of them editorials, contained no attributions.

### Discussion

Propositions 128 and 135 received major play in state newspapers during the October study period. In the month preceding the election, the seven newspapers studied devoted 2,660 column inches to news stories and editorials dealing with the ballot initiatives. That was a substantial commitment in a month when news budgets were topped with the Gulf War and the gubernatorial

campaigns of Democratic aspirant Dianne Feinstein and now Republican Gov. Pete Wilson. Thirty of the news stories, editorials and opinion pieces were illustrated with line art or photographs.

Despite overwhelming editorial opposition to the two initiatives, most of the news stories appeared to be balanced. In most cases in which proponents of a measure were quoted, approximately equal space was given to the views of opponents. However, because of the nature of source identification and attribution, readers may have found it difficult to weigh the arguments of either side.

Attributions to unnamed sources are unsettling. Anonymity can be a reporter's device for protecting a valuable confidential source. In other instances, anonymous attribution may be a kind of "journalistic shorthand" employed by reporters with extensive knowledge of the subject to summarize conflicting points of view. But anonymity simply may mask sloppy reporting. Most readers have no way to judge the expertise of the reporters or the credibility of their unnamed sources.

Such anonymous attributions as "opponents," "supporters" and "proponents" may be defensible when they are generalizations made specific later in the same stories - or because they clearly sum up points of view. But of questionable value are unnamed "experts," "analysts," "critics" and "environmentalists." Some writers even attributed information to "adherents of global warming theory," "reclaimed water users," "political veterans and professional," and "credible people who know what they are talking about."

Also of concern are named sources with loose identifications. Among these found in the study were "Rocky Mountain Institute," "pro-

ducer Hilary Larson," "rocker Don Henley," and "Dave Johnson, a sandblaster from Stanton."

Identification problems also were found when advocacy groups were named as sources. These ranged from the familiar Sierra Club through the lesser-known National Resources Defense Council to the obscure Environmental Media Association of Culver City. Since advocacy group identifications rarely convey a sense of the organizations' membership numbers, financial support or official positions, readers can't assess the credibility of the organizations named or the importance of the points of view attributed to them.

Surprisingly, state government sources were infrequently used in news stories and editorials dealing with the two propositions. Although agricultural chemicals were listed as the first major concern of Proposition 128, the state agency responsible for enforcing pesticide regulations, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, was cited as a source only once.

Twenty-three of the 83 articles included attributions to sources at the University of California and other universities. However, these numbers obscure the fact that most writers zeroed in on a single study. That research suggested that safer alternatives were available for the pesticides which would have been banned by Proposition 128.

Federal government sources were used 14 times in the articles, the Environmental Protection Agency most frequently. But some readers might have perceived former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, cited in four stories, as a federal official. In reality, he was associated with the "No on 128" campaign.

Most surprisingly, in view of the thrust of both propositions, was the

infrequency with which agricultural sources were cited. While Proposition 128 was perceived as broadly environmental in scope, the issue of pesticide use in agriculture frequently was raised by proponents and opponents. Proposition 135 was sponsored primarily by agricultural interests. Yet farmer opinion was given short shrift.

The largest farm organization in the state, the California Farm Bureau Federation, was cited only four times. Individuals identified as farmers also were cited only four times.

### Summary

California newspapers gave extensive news and editorial coverage to Proposition 128 in the general election of 1990. It was primarily defined as an environmental issue and was explored in some detail. Proposition 135, the "industry-backed" initiative, was essentially ignored. In this respect, the newspapers set the agenda and framed the issues for their readers.

Although the voters' rejection of both initiatives cannot be attributed to the unanimous editorial opposition of the newspapers studied, Rystrom (1986) suggests that voters are more susceptible to editorial influence when urged to oppose issues which would cost them money. Much of the editorial opposition was based on the expectation that increased regulation would raise taxes or increase the cost of doing business in the state.

The newspapers' page 1 and other A section play of stories on Proposition 128 supports Atwater's (1988) view that newspaper editors regard major environmental stories to be worthy of prominent news treatment. Atwater found that the average environmental news story was 13 inches long; stories in this

study averaged 32 column inches. The sources used in news stories about Proposition 128 and 135 raise some disturbing questions: Does the frequency with which writers rely on anonymous sources and loose identification suggest reporting inadequacies? Does heavy reliance on the statements of advocacy groups open the press to manipulation? Does the failure to seek research-based information affect objectivity? These questions merit further study.

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