

Anti-Democracy in California

October 8, 1911 *New York Times* Editorial

In 1911, the state of California amended its constitution to create the ballot initiative, the referendum, and the recall. In response, the New York Times published the following, remarkably prescient warning.

We have received the official statement of questions submitted to the people of California in connection with the recent special election, setting forth the amendments to the Constitution to be then voted upon, together with arguments pro and con. The statement is in more senses than one monstrous. It is printed in small and nearly unreadable type on both sides of an immense sheet, the reading matter covering in all twelve square feet. The amendments are twenty-three in number. Four of them are really important—woman suffrage, the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. Most of them are not fit for constitutional enactment at all, but should be within the scope of the powers of the Legislature.

The number, complexity, and minuteness of the propositions submitted to the popular vote make it physically impossible that the ordinary voter shall understand their nature and effect or the actual consequences of his own act. And the process of confusing and practically paralyzing the faculty of discretion and discrimination in the mind of the voter is, of course, a continuous and cumulative one. The multitudinous changes in the “fundamental” law wrought at one election invite and, indeed compel, further changes, correcting the mistakes made, or adding to them. Consistency, stability, and continuity are simply impracticable under this process. The rights and interests of the community are involved in a perpetual flux. Human experience has shown that certainty, simplicity, clarity, and reasonable uniformity are the prime safeguards of justice and reason in the making and in the application of the laws affecting the public. These cannot be had in a State where the Constitution is made to meddle with details innumerable and where its provisions are subject to the passing whims of popular feeling and opinion.

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This new method of handling the basic law of the State is advocated in the name of democracy. In reality it is utterly and hopelessly undemocratic. While pretending to give greater rights to the voters, it deprives them of the opportunity effectively and intelligently to use their powers. They receive the right to vote much oftener and on a larger number of matters than before, but the number and variety of the votes they are called on to cast does away with all chance of really using sense and discretion as to all of them. The new method is proposed as a check on the machines. But the strength of the machines lies in the inattention and indifference of the voters, and the voters are sure in the long run to be more inattentive and indifferent in proportion to the number of the questions forced upon them at one time. When the machine managers get familiar with the working of the new method, they will work it for their own ends far more readily than they work the present method.

The average voter, muddled and puzzled and tired by the impossible task of really understanding and deciding on a mass of matters, will give it up, and then the politicians will get in their fine work.

The remedy for the undoubted evils of machine politics is not in multiplying, confusing, and making more troublesome the duties of the voter, but in simplifying and restricting them and making the discharge of each of them more effective. So long as we make our political business so difficult that common men cannot, will not, and ought not to give to it the time and labor absolutely needed for success in it, so long there will be professionals to attend to it. It would be as easy to run the business of a big railway by leaving every detail of its management to a vote of the shareholders as it will be to run the business of a State under the new system. And the results in the latter case will be as mischievous as those in the former would be sure to be. **B**