

# History says Proposition 50 is unlikely to pass

## Overview

“Ballot measures are tall lifts in California,” wrote Dustin Gardiner, Blake Jones, and Melanie Mason in the Politico California Playbook on September 16, 2025. They’re right: overall California initiatives have a 63.84% failure rate at the ballot since 1912. Given just that history, Proposition 50 has about a two-thirds likelihood of being rejected by the voters. This result is supported by both our own data and the California Secretary of State’s initiative history data, which we explain below. Because the University of California bars us from taking pro/con positions on live initiatives we state no view here on whether Proposition 50 is a good idea or not. If you want to know what we think about that, see this article published before the measure qualified for the ballot.

## Discussion

California’s constitution currently empowers a 14-member Citizens Redistricting Commission to draw the state’s maps for state legislative and congressional seats. The state’s voters created that commission in 2008 (by Proposition 11) and gave it power over state legislative districts, and then expanded that authority in 2010 (by Proposition 20) to include congressional districts. Both were citizen-initiated measures. The commission adopted the current congressional district map in 2021; that map was used in the 2022 and 2024 elections and is currently valid through 2030.

Proposition 50 is a proposal by the legislature that would amend California’s constitution to override the commission and its map with a new, legislature-drawn map for the three election cycles from 2026 through 2030. (The commission’s website notes that it “has absolutely no involvement in the Governor’s efforts to replace the state’s Congressional maps.”) The legislature’s proposed new map applies only to congressional seats; the commission’s map for state legislative districts would be unaffected. The measure’s immediate intent is to counter attempts

in Republican-controlled states to redraw congressional maps in their favor, with the ultimate point being to redistrict enough Democrat-controlled states to net gain a majority of House seats in the 2026 midterm elections.

As a practical matter that seems unlikely to happen, given media reports calling out serious concerns about whether Proposition 50 (or anything else) can actually help Democrats win the House. Simple math questions whether chasing marginal seat gains can further Democratic interests: according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Republicans control more state legislatures. This means, as both the New York Times and Politico have pointed out, that in a nationwide redistricting war Republicans have the advantage, because it is practically impossible for enough blue states to redraw their maps before the 2026 midterms to tilt the balance. And the Mercury News reports that holding the special election to hunt that snark is expected to cost the state \$282.6 million.

On the more immediate question whether Proposition 50 is likely to pass, history says the odds are stacked against it. In *California Constitutional Law: Direct Democracy* (2019) 92 S. Cal. L. Rev 557, the authors analyzed all California ballot measures up to 2017. The study divided initiatives by titled for circulation, qualified for the ballot, rejected, and approved. The authors found that of all qualified initiatives 35.1% passed. That approximately one-third pass rate did not change significantly depending on initiative type. Initiative constitutional amendments have nearly the same success rate as initiatives generally: for qualified initiative amendments the pass rate was 34.42%. The takeaway is that any given initiative measure that qualifies for the ballot has around a one-third chance of passing.

That study was from a few years ago, so we checked its results against the most current dataset available from California's Secretary of State. The results were nearly the same: counting from 1912 to 2024 the voters approved 34.91% of all qualified initiatives, and rejected 63.84% (the 1.25% delta covers court actions and such). The one-third pass rate conclusion holds. The upshot: Proposition 50 has around a two-thirds chance of rejection.

## **Conclusion**

To be clear: we cannot take a position on whether spending \$282.6 million dollars of

taxpayer funds in a likely \$20 billion budget deficit year on a one-third chance in an all-but-unwinnable game is a good bet. All we can say is that the odds are not in California's favor. It's up to the voters if they want to go all in with that hand.

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