



EDITORIAL MEMORANDUM

Voters Affirm Commitment to Public Schools And Reject Vouchers on November 7

While Election 2000 was fraught with uncertainties, perhaps more than any other election in our nation's history, there is no misreading the voters' will on one issue: People across the country want to support and strengthen public schools, and they're willing to pay for it. Among education referenda voted on in various state elections this year, the most prominent were the two highly publicized and heavily financed private school voucher initiatives in Michigan and California, both of which were defeated decisively by voters. While voters turned down vouchers on November 7, voters in several states were eager to provide greater resources for their public schools.

Vouchers Fail in California and Michigan

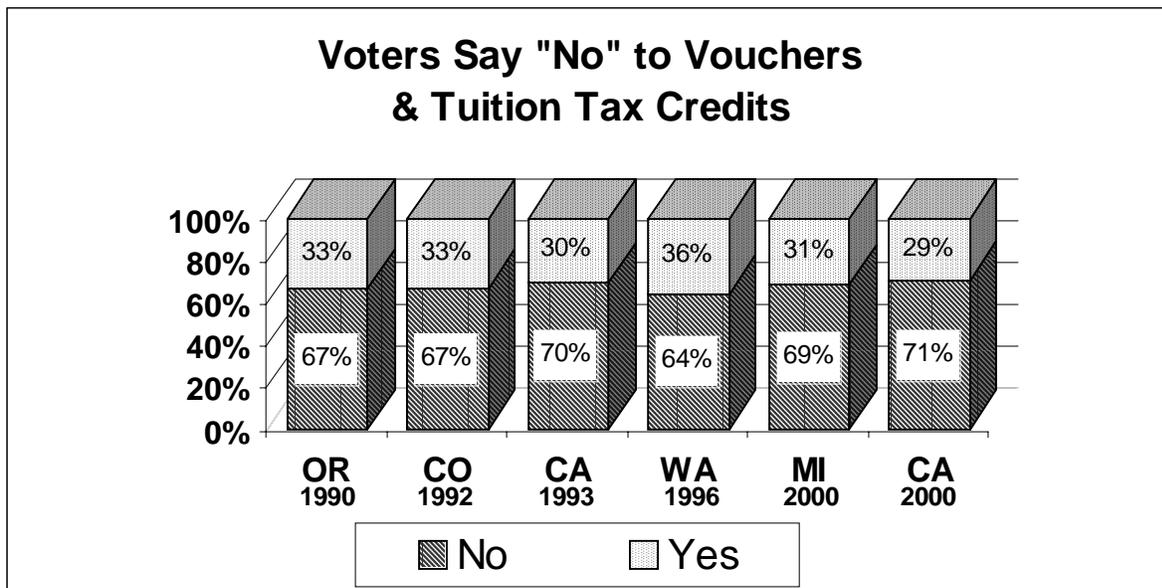
In California, billionaire dot.com entrepreneur Tim Draper fired his blunderbuss – the voucher proposal known as Proposition 38 – hoping to shatter the very foundation of public education. Even some voucher supporters recognized that Draper's proposal went too far towards establishing a *laissez-faire* scheme that would have subsidized private schooling for the rich while leaving the vast majority of students behind. In Michigan, a more nuanced voucher initiative launched and financed by Amway multimillionaire Dick DeVos was given a much better chance of being accepted by the voters. Both proposals were soundly defeated, however, with 71% of Californians and 69% of Michiganders saying “no” to vouchers.

Perhaps even more significantly, these measures failed most decisively among the constituencies who voucher supporters claimed, however disingenuously, would benefit most from the proposals: poor, minority families whose children attend the most seriously underfunded inner-city schools.

Once again, when asked to vote their preferences, people of this country turned down proposals to send public money to private and religious schools. Seven state referenda on school vouchers and three on tuition tax credits have been held in the last twenty-eight years. All of them have been defeated by large margins. The highest percentage of votes in favor of vouchers

was on the first referendum, held in Maryland in 1972, which received 45% “yes” votes. No such initiative since then has garnered more than 36%.

Since 1990 there have been six ballot referenda on vouchers or tax credits that would authorize public expenditures for private schooling: two in California, and one each in Oregon, Colorado, Washington and Michigan. As seen in the graph, below, none of them has received a “yes” vote from more than 36% of the voters.



The results of the two referenda in California and Michigan confirm that the more people get to know about a private school voucher proposal, the less they like it. Public opinion polls have, in recent years, found a relatively large portion of the population (although usually less than a majority) open to the idea of vouchers, when the polling question is asked in isolation. For example, in the recent annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, when asked “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?” 39% said they favored such an idea, while 56% were opposed. Yet when the same interviewees were asked “Which of these two plans would you prefer – improving and strengthening the existing public schools or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools?” 75% said they favor improving our public schools while only 22% said they favor providing vouchers. This strong preference for strong public schools carried over into this election where, given the concrete choices offered by Prop 38 in California and Proposal 1 in Michigan, voters clearly came down – by similar margins – on the side of public schools and chose not to be diverted by vouchers.

An analysis of the election results and exit polls shows that the opposition to vouchers in these two states was broad-based, cutting across racial, ethnic, religion, family income, and residential/geographic lines. In both Michigan and California, no racial or ethnic, religious or income group gave vouchers as much as 40% support (see table in the Appendix). None of California’s 58 counties gave even 40% support to Prop 38. Only one of Michigan’s 83 counties – Menominee County, which still turned down vouchers, but by the slightly narrower margin of

57% to 43% – gave as much as 40% support to Proposal 1. Whether urban or rural, wealthy or poor, 100% of the counties in the two states rejected the idea of diverting public funds from public schools to pay for private or religious school education.

Proponents in both states sought to sell the public on the idea that vouchers were the best cure for the educational problems in many cities, and as such, that vouchers would be a boon for the largely poor and minority communities in our metropolitan centers. The voters, especially minority voters, who in many cases rejected voucher proposals by compelling margins of 3-1 or larger, adamantly rejected these arguments.

In Michigan, seven school districts would have been included in the voucher program immediately, due to their low high school graduation rates. One of these was Detroit. And yet, the City of Detroit rejected Proposal 1 by an astounding 82% - 18% margin. Voters in counties where Michigan's other large cities of Flint, Grand Rapids, and Pontiac are located registered "no" votes of 73%, 65% and 68%, respectively. It was no different in California, where Los Angeles County voted "no" on Prop 38 by a 73% to 27% margin. Oakland, California's Alameda County was even more decisive: 78% - 22%. Most telling of all is the fact that African American and Latino voters – whose children make up the overwhelming majority of students in the schools facing the most difficult challenges – returned decisive "no" verdicts to voucher initiatives. African Americans in Michigan voted against vouchers at even a higher rate than did whites. Exit poll data showed African Americans in that state voting vouchers down 77% to 23% while the margin against vouchers among whites was 69% to 31%. In California, Latinos also rejected vouchers by 77% - 23% while African Americans voted "no" by a 68% to 32% margin. Clearly, minority voters prefer to improve their public schools, not abandon them.

The Catholic Church, whose system of parochial schools provides the great majority of private school seats in U.S. cities, strongly supported both voucher initiatives. Yet even Catholic voters came out against vouchers by margins of 69% - 31% in California and 64% - 34% in Michigan. Rejection of vouchers was consistent across income groups as well. No income category – poor, wealthy, or in between – gave either voucher proposal more than 33% support.

Voters Support Public Education with Their Pocketbooks

Both voucher initiatives contained clauses designed to convince voters that the measures would simultaneously introduce vouchers and step up funding for the public schools. California's Prop 38 *appeared* to put into place a mechanism guaranteeing that the state's per pupil expenditures on public schools would meet or exceed the "national average school funding." In fact, it would have done no such thing. It simply stated, "The legislature *may*..." enact such a mechanism. Michigan's Proposal 1 contained a public school funding level "guarantee" that would, in fact, have done nothing more than make a one-time adjustment to update the current minimum to the 2000-2001 level of expenditures. By rejecting these initiatives, voters in both states made it clear that they saw these "guarantees" for what they were – window dressing, designed to confuse the fact that these voucher proposals would do nothing to enhance public schools and much to hurt them. At the same time, where straightforward measures to increase or enable the increase of funding for public schools were on state ballots, voters made clear their strong support for public education. Voters in six states approved

referenda that either committed more resources to education or made it easier to do so in the future.

California voters, while rejecting Prop 38's vouchers, at the same time approved Prop 39, which lowers the threshold for local communities to approve school construction bonds. Until now, a two-thirds majority has been required for approval, seriously impairing school construction and renovation efforts. From now on, a 55% vote will be sufficient to approve such bond issues. The measure passed with 53% in favor. In a similar vein, 55% of Oklahoma voters approved Question 690, which will streamline school funding by eliminating the necessity of annual votes on school levies.

Voters in four states passed ballot measures approving increases in public school funding. Amendment 23, which passed in Colorado by a 53% - 47% vote, requires the legislature to increase public school spending by at least one percentage point *over the inflation rate* for the next 10 years. This is especially significant since voters there had approved in 1992 a ballot measure which set limits on new spending.

In approving Measure 1, Oregon's voters took a major step in holding the state legislature accountable for the performance of the state's schools. The measure requires the legislature to provide sufficient funding to enable the schools to meet state education quality goals. The vote was decisive, with 66% voting "yes" and 34% "no." If these funding levels are not achieved, the legislators will have to submit a report explaining why. This is a bold, new tack on the "adequacy" approach to educational equity concerns and reflects growing public concern over the possibly punitive effects that increased dependence on high stakes tests could have on students and teachers if those tests are used as the enforcement mechanism for state standards and accountability systems. At the same time, Oregonians rejected by 55% - 45% an initiative that would have resulted in a 100% write-off of federal income tax obligations on state income tax. This would have produced a 20% reduction of public services including K-12 education.

Next door in Washington, voters passed two initiatives, 728 and 732 (with 71% and 62% in favor, respectively), to direct a portion of any annual property tax surplus to schools on a per-pupil basis, redirect previously unobligated lottery proceeds to finance school construction, and guarantee annual cost-of-living raises to public school employees. At the same time, these voters rejected a ballot initiative that would have authorized charter schools.

Arizona voters approved Proposition 301, which will increase education funding by raising the state sales and use tax by .6 of a cent. The measure passed with a 53% - 47% vote. Most of the new funds are earmarked for K-12 schools and will go towards reduced class size, additional school days, increased teacher pay, and building improvement bond issuance. To offset the regressive effects of a sales tax, the proposition also provides for a low-income household tax credit.

Virginia and South Carolina voters (along with voters in Washington, as mentioned above) expressed their support for improving public education by approving new lottery arrangements that will allocate lottery funds for K-12 funding and college scholarships.

Voters Mandate Stronger Public Schools

Six times since 1990, overwhelming majorities of voters have rejected the idea that publicly funded vouchers and tuition tax credits for private and religious schooling are the way to improve education. Some \$45 million spent to promote support for vouchers in California and Michigan this year failed to persuade even a third of the voters in those states. Urban, African American, Latino and Catholic voters – the very groups targeted by this campaign to abandon the American institution of universal public education and Common School ideals – have returned a landslide “No” verdict on vouchers, by margins of 2-, 3-, and even 4-to-1.

Even in a year in which the electorate is so closely divided that races for the House, Senate, and Presidency are still in doubt a full three weeks after the election, the American people have spoken with remarkable, dramatic clarity about one thing. They believe in their public schools, and they want to see them continue to improve. And, they are willing to pay for it. The voters have given their elected officials an unambiguous mandate. They want their representatives to abandon distractions like vouchers that divert us from the important task at hand and to fulfill their responsibilities to provide for public schools that provide high-quality education for all students, wherever they may live, whatever their families’ financial circumstances, and regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or special needs. The American people have spoken – it is time for legislators and representatives to listen, and to act.

APPENDIX

Voting Group:	California Prop 38 ^a		Michigan Proposal 1 ^b	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
All voters	29%	71%	31%	69%
Race/ethnicity				
White	30	70	31	69
Black	32	68	23	77
Latino	23	77	--	--
Asian	34	66	--	--
Religion				
Protestant	35	65	31	69
Catholic	31	69	34	64
Jewish	17	83	--	--
Annual family income (CA)				
< \$20,000	27	73		
\$20,000-\$39,999	25	75		
\$40,000-\$59,999	30	70		
\$60,000-\$74,999	32	68		
\$75,000 or more	30	70		
Annual family income (MI)				
< \$15,000			--	--
\$15,000-\$29,999			27	73
\$30,000-\$49,999			32	68
\$50,000-\$74,999			33	67
\$75,000-\$99,999			33	67
\$100,000 or more			30	70
Urban/rural^c				
City over 50,000 pop.	30	70	27	73
Suburb	28	72	36	64
Rural	34	66	27	73
Large urban area results^d				
Los Angeles County	27	73		
Alameda (Oakland)	22	78		
Santa Clara (San Jose)	27	73		
San Francisco County	21	79		
San Diego County	34	66		
Wayne (Detroit)			28	72
City of Detroit			18	82
Genesee (Flint)			27	73
Kent (Grand Rapids)			35	65
Oakland (Pontiac)			33	68

^a California data from Los Angeles Times Poll, with interviews of 3,474 voters at 51 polling places. Margin of error is +/- 3%.

^b Michigan data, with interviews of 1,213 voters, from the CBS exit poll (http://elect.cbsig.net/campaign2000results/state/state_mi.html).

^c California urban/rural data, with interviews of 1,702 voters, from CBS exit poll (http://elect.cbsig.net/campaign2000results/state/poll_ca01.html).

^d Large urban area data from vote tallies as reported by CBS, not exit polls: For Michigan, http://elect.cbsig.net/campaign2000results/county/county_mioi10.html, and for California, http://elect.cbsig.net/campaign2000results/county/county_ca01.html.