

# Rating the newspapers as political persuaders

By KENNETH RYSTROM

Are editorial endorsements by California newspapers worth the paper they are printed on? A major study of California elections from 1948 through 1962 and another study of the 1966 election concluded that newspaper editorials did exert measurable influence on voting, especially at the local level and on state ballot propositions. But those elections occurred when a majority of Americans still regarded newspapers as their major source of news. Now the Roper polls show that 65 percent of the public considers television its prime source of news.

Have newspapers also declined as political persuaders? To try to answer that question, a study somewhat along the lines of the earlier studies was made of endorsements and election returns in the November 1978 California general election.

In brief, the study showed:

- **Endorsements** apparently had some effect on ballot propositions but very little on statewide candidate races.
- **Editorial positions** seemed to have the most effect on Proposition 7, the death-penalty issue.
- **Middle-of-the-road newspapers** seemed to have more influence than liberal or conservative papers, and conservative papers seemed to have more influence than liberal ones.

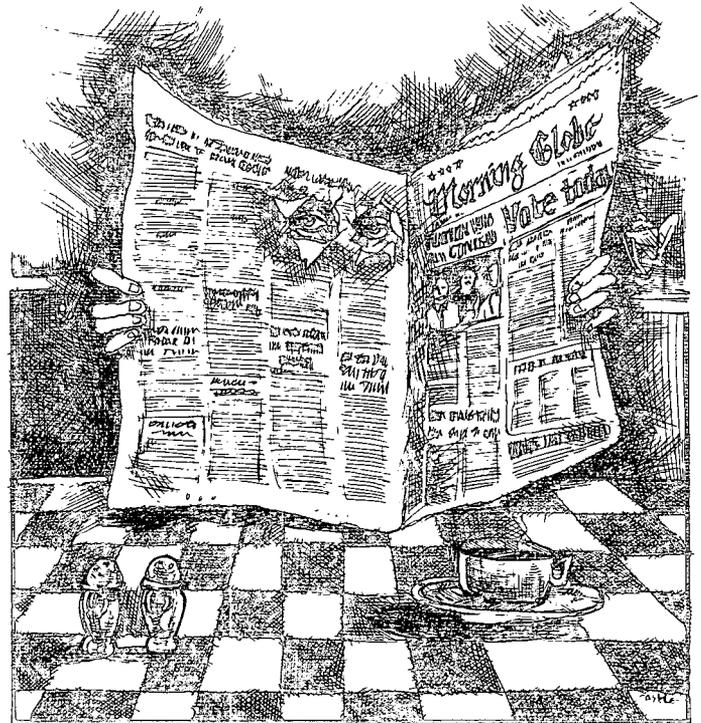
Thirty-six daily newspapers responded to a request for copies of their endorsement editorials, including most of the large papers in the state. Endorsements were tabulated for all eight ballot propositions and six statewide executive offices, but five of the propositions and two of the state races were eliminated, since the newspapers took virtually unanimous positions on them.

## Natural inclinations

Of course it is not possible to assume that specific voter response resulted from individual editorial endorsements. Comparing voter percentages in the circulation areas of specific newspapers with state percentages does not produce very meaningful results, since natural voting inclinations of residents in various areas range widely.

Take San Francisco County as an example. This is a relatively liberal, pro-Democratic area. Consequently, when the *San Francisco Chronicle* opposed Proposition 7, which would have toughened the death penalty, it could be seen to have tremendous influence on voters: 55 percent of San Francisco County voters followed the *Chronicle's* recommendation to vote "no." Statewide, only 29 percent voted "no." On the other hand, the *Chronicle* appeared to have a negative impact on its readers' votes in the governor's race. It endorsed Evelle Younger, who polled 37 percent statewide but only 23 percent in the county.

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The *Chronicle* affords an extreme example of why the apparent impact of individual newspapers is not possible to measure using this approach. But apparent impact can be measured with some reliability when a number of newspapers are grouped to eliminate idiosyncracies of voting areas.

The study compared local vote percentages for endorsed candidates and propositions with statewide percentages. The results: In the local circulation areas of the 36 papers, the three controversial propositions ran, on the average, 4.21 percent ahead of the state average. But on the four candidate races, there was virtually no difference.

The proposition most affected by endorsements seemed to be Proposition 7. Local returns on the average ran 6.17 percent ahead of the state percentage. The next most affected issue apparently was Proposition 3, which authorized the sale of surplus highway right-of-way land in the coastal zone for recreational and scenic purposes at less than the current market value but at no less than the original cost. In this case the average percentage in the local areas exceeded the state percentage by 3.73 percent. In this instance voters seemed to be looking for endorsements for guidance on an issue they knew little about. The earlier studies found a similar pattern on little-noticed issues.

Proposition 2 seemed to fall into the same category. It

proposed to delete a constitutional provision authorizing the Public Utilities Commission to assign cases to individual commissioners. It too was unexciting and largely ignored. The average percentage in the local areas exceeded the state percentage by 2.72 percent.

In three of the four statewide races the average percentages in the circulation areas of the papers were practically identical to the state percentages — indicating no apparent overall influence on the voting. In the race between Jerry Brown and Younger, the difference was a mere one-hundredth of 1 percent. Apparent effects on the races for attorney general and lieutenant governor were about the same — virtually nonexistent.

Editors may be a little more encouraged by figures in the state treasurer's race. In the circulation areas of papers endorsing Jesse Unruh for re-election, the average local percentage ran 2.45 percent ahead of his state percentage.

A liberal-conservative breakdown of newspapers was also

developed through the endorsement study. Here's how:

First, the four Democratic nominees were ranked from left to right in the order of increasing acceptability to the newspapers. This placed Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, running for attorney general, on the extreme left, as the least acceptable to the newspapers. She had five endorsements. Then came Mervyn Dymally for lieutenant governor, with seven endorsements; Brown with 15; and Unruh with 25.

Then three propositions were positioned among the candidates by using the same guidelines. The "yes" side of Proposition 2, the PUC measure, was placed between Burke and Dymally. This was done because the "no" endorsements had a high correlation with the endorsements of Burke and Dymally's more conservative Republican opponents. The "no" side of Proposition 7, clearly the more liberal side of the death penalty issue, with 20 endorsements, was placed between Brown and Unruh. The "yes" side of Proposition 3, with 30 endorsements, was placed at the right. The right half of the spectrum received the opposite side of each proposition, placed in the same order.

Then the papers were ranked: Those endorsing the most Democrats and the most liberal sides of the propositions were listed at the top. Those endorsing the most Republicans and conservative sides of the propositions were ranked at the bottom. The shift from liberal to conservative endorsements as one moves down the list is, of course, not uniform. But the pattern that emerges is fairly clear. (See table.)

Did readers follow newspaper endorsements in differing ways across the political battleground? On propositions, the most apparently influential were papers in the middle-ground. To a lesser extent, papers at the conservative end seemed to influence readers more than the liberal papers.

The governor's vote was examined in the same manner, but the results showed no significant difference among the groups. None of the papers exerted enough apparent influence to show up on a graph.

#### Possible explanations

- **Why should newspapers** toward the center of the field seem to exert more influence than those more liberal and more conservative? One reason might be that readers find middle-of-road endorsements easier to accept — more in line with their inclinations. Another reason might be that voters in the middle of the political spectrum, being neither extremely liberal nor extremely conservative partisans, are less interested and hence less informed in the political process. When the time comes that they finally get interested, just before an election, they may need information and guidance more than the partisans.

- **Why should conservative** papers have had more apparent influence in the 1978 election than liberal papers? If a conservative breeze were blowing in that election, as was commonly assumed, voters who felt the breeze might have found conservative endorsements more compatible with their current inclinations than liberal endorsements.

- **Why should the papers** as a whole have so little apparent effect on the candidate races? One explanation is that voters have easier ways of making decisions in these races — political party, personality, political image, record in office — than they do on impersonal ballot propositions. In 1978, most voters probably had made up their minds in the governor's race long before newspapers began endorsing. Nothing happened during the campaign to weaken Brown's early lead.

One final word should be added: The apparently limited effect of endorsement editorials resulted from a study of statewide issues and candidates only. As any school board or city council candidate will testify, a local paper's stands on local races and issues can be the pivotal factor.

## Political ratings of California Newspapers

How newspapers ranked on the political spectrum for last November's statewide election: The newspapers at the top of the list were rated the most liberal, based on seven possible endorsements, and those at the bottom were considered most conservative.

	Burke Proposition 2 Yes	Dymally Brown Proposition 7 No	Unruh Proposition 3 Yes	Deukmejian Proposition 2 No	Curb Younger Proposition 7 Yes	French Proposition 3 No
Fresno Bee	•	•	•	•	•	•
Modesto Bee	•	•	•	•	•	•
Sacramento Bee	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Jose Mercury-News	•	•	•	•	•	•
Ventura County Star Free-Press	•	•	•	•	•	•
Redding Record Searchlight	•	•	•	•	•	•
Los Angeles Times	•	•	•	•	•	•
Escondido Times-Advocate	•	•	•	•	•	•
El Cajon Californian	•	•	•	•	•	•
Riverside Press-Enterprise	•	•	•	•	•	•
Santa Barbara News-Press	•	•	•	•	•	•
Chico Enterprise-Record	•	•	•	•	•	•
Los Angeles Herald-Examiner	•	•	•	•	•	•
Vallejo Times-Herald	•	•	•	•	•	•
Richmond Independent	•	•	•	•	•	•
Berkeley Gazette	•	•	•	•	•	•
Orange County Daily Pilot	•	•	•	•	•	•
Ontario Daily Gazette	•	•	•	•	•	•
Sacramento Union	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Bernardino Sun	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Francisco Chronicle	•	•	•	•	•	•
Long Beach I. P.-T.	•	•	•	•	•	•
Fullerton News Tribune	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Diego Tribune	•	•	•	•	•	•
Oakland Tribune	•	•	•	•	•	•
Palo Alto Times	•	•	•	•	•	•
Palm Springs Desert Sun	•	•	•	•	•	•
Bakersfield Californian	•	•	•	•	•	•
Fontana Herald-News	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Mateo Times	•	•	•	•	•	•
Redwood City Tribune	•	•	•	•	•	•
San Diego Union	•	•	•	•	•	•
Redlands Daily Facts	•	•	•	•	•	•
Santa Monica Evening Outlook	•	•	•	•	•	•
Torrance Daily Breeze	•	•	•	•	•	•



## LEGISLATURE'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

# Why Brown jumped into the budget inferno

By ED SALZMAN

Why did Jerry Brown, fresh from an override defeat on retroactive pay for state employees, invite another embarrassing override by cutting the Legislature's appropriation for 1979-80 pay hikes for state workers? Why did Brown sign a budget that gave more money this year by percentage to welfare recipients than to state employees? At the climax of the fiscal battle, why did the Governor infuriate already-angered legislators by appointing to the Orange County board of supervisors Edison Miller, a former Marine officer accused of helping the North Vietnamese while a prisoner of war?

The answer is that Brown is now trying to woo the left while holding the right in his campaign to wrest the presidency from Jimmy Carter. By vetoing pay raises for public employees, he theoretically reinforced his image as a tight fist with a buck. By being relatively generous with welfare recipients and by appointing Jane Fonda's candidate to the Orange supervisors, Brown helped restore his once-decent connections with liberal elements around the country. Nationally, Brown has decided to take the anti-nuclear, pro-environmentalist position in the coming conflict over new energy supplies for the nation.

### A distant constituency

Brown is not particularly concerned these days with making friends among state workers or California legislators. His constituency is 3,000 miles away where the citizens of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and other states will soon be voting in presidential primaries. He lost little nationally by being overridden on employee salaries. To those interested in cutting the cost of government, he looks like a martyr battling mobs of profligate spenders. Every conflict over spending in which he is on the conservative side is probably a plus in the East — regardless of the eventual outcome in Sacramento.

In the area of welfare, Brown can point out that the 14.5 percent increase voted by the Legislature still falls a bit short of meeting the cost-of-living increase mandated under

California law. In fact, the state may lose money by not granting the full cost-of-living raise of 15.1 percent. That is because federal law now makes some blind, disabled and aged recipients eligible for food stamps, and the state will have to bear the cost of administering this new program.

Brown has been trying by every means possible to repair his damaged relationships with black leaders in California and across the country. Since welfare is an issue of great concern to blacks, Brown probably gained some credits by keeping the welfare appropriation untouched, even though he had originally proposed a much smaller expenditure.

The Legislature completed work on the budget and the local-government Proposition 13 bailout bill on July 20th, then recessed for a four-week vacation. It remained to be seen whether Brown would reduce the \$4.85 billion bailout bill or leave it standing without change. The Governor had warned that current revenues might not be sufficient to meet the cost of the bailout bill in future years if the Legislature restored the pay raise cuts made by Brown. The state started the current fiscal year with a surplus of about \$3 billion. The economy was in such an unsettled state that it was difficult to predict what the surplus might be at the end of the 1979-80 fiscal year, but it will probably be sufficient to maintain the current level of spending for at least one more year. After that, the well might run dry, especially if initiative campaigns to cut taxes are successful.

### The three-stage battle

This year's battle of the budget came in three distinct stages. First there was the retroactive pay bill, then the basic budget, and finally the bailout bill. Because of the override attempts, it appeared during mid-July that lawmakers were voting on a major fiscal measure just about every day. Legislators this year didn't even make an attempt to meet the constitutional deadline of June 15th for passage of the budget. Predictions made long ago, that the package would not be completed until vacation getaway day, turned out to be accu-