Educate Yourselves: Three Cases of Civic Education In King County Environmental Initiatives

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Introduction

The state of Washington, and King County in particular, have a reputation for vocal public concern over issues of the environment, and a quick look at popular ballot initiatives in the state over the last half-century supports the stereotype. Since 1964 (or for the last 12 major election cycles), no less than 18 initiatives to the people have appeared on the state ballot proposing laws that knowingly (though not always directly) impacted protection of the local environment. But while a few of these measures—such as Initiative 937 in 2006 which required large facilities to obtain 15 percent of their electricity from renewable resources—have fared on the ballot in a way that reflected support for conservationist policy, most have not, either in the state as a whole or in Washington’s many non-metropolitan regions. This history does not—at least at first look—seem to hold with Washingtonians’ apparent valuation of environmental protection in our selection of elected officials and our avid public conversation.

The inquiry driving this paper arose from the failure of one such ballot initiative, Proposition 1, which in a special vote this April proposed to raise taxes incrementally and increase the price of car tabs so as to keep King County public transit at operating levels. Among opinions put forward as to the cause of Prop 1’s failure, one asserted that misinformation was spread by opponents of the measure, and that citizens who voted no or abstained from voting could easily have “educated themselves” about the issue and voted otherwise. The question of whether King County voters are responsible for their own understanding or misunderstanding of popular initiatives—specifically those that relate to the environment—drove this investigation of three such initiatives and the opportunities for citizenship education that surrounded them. In each of these cases, an environmental issue was a subject of an initiative to the people, but widespread misinformation led citizens to decide against collective environmental improvements. Drawing on independent media content, ballot text, campaign literature and evidence of political debates and discussions, this paper argues that the people of King County have repeatedly received inadequate educational resources about the ecological issues at stake in local politics. The lack of such resources may have helped special or regional interests overpower collective interests in decisions on these measures.

Three Cases: Initiatives 256 and 456 and Proposition 1

The initiatives explored in this paper span over four decades of environmental politics in King County. In 1970, Initiative 256 moved to require that drinks consumed off-premise be sold in recyclable bottles or cans. Initiative 456, on the ballot in 1984, argued for the reversal of court rulings that had increased Indian rights to commercial salmon and
steelhead fishing, as well as fishery management.\(^5\) Proposition 1, as we know, moved to raise local taxes so as to preserve public transit offerings at the marginal expense of car drivers. The environmental issues dealt with in these initiatives are very different, as are the ethical and pragmatic debates that have surrounded them. For all their differences, however, these cases have surprising commonalities in the ways they entered popular political conversation. Most importantly, the outcomes of these ballot measures were ultimately determined by regional and special interests, with relatively few voters swayed by—and potentially not made aware of—county-wide environmental interests.

The proponents of Initiative 256 began gathering signatures at a time when recycling, a relatively new innovation, was publicized both as a solution to problems of limited resources and a solution to the “visual pollution” of litter.\(^6\) Though there is much overlap between these two concerns, they were stressed unequally in political movements such as Keep America Beautiful, which emphasized the beauty of local environments\(^7\) and informed on much of the campaign rhetoric for Initiative 256. Rather than trying to impose a culture shift by asking Washington residents to avoid littering and willingly separate their trash, the initiative advocated encouraging residents to return their recyclables to local deposits for a refund. To accomplish this goal, the proposed law required that beverages “sold for off-premise consumption” come in containers with a refund value of at least five cents.\(^8\) Opponents of the initiative, heavily backed by brewing companies that did not wish to bear the adjustment costs of the new law, argued that it would harm the economy and unfairly penalize Washingtonians who did not litter.\(^9\) These controversies directed popular debates toward the initiative’s fairness and economic costs, rather than its goals of resource conservation. Initiative 256 failed in 19 of 38 Washington counties, including King County, where 46.2 percent of voters supported and 53.8 percent opposed. 67 percent of registered voters in King County voted on the initiative.\(^10\)

Fourteen years later, Initiative 456 engaged voters on the issues of salmon and trout conservation and Indian treaty rights. Though salmon conservation debates had been occurring off and on for over a century by that time, the issue did not have much political longevity. Repeatedly, different groups in Washington with an interest in salmon conservation, rather than being “willing to accept responsibility and bear the costs of recovery,” had “simplified the past to create scapegoats and…justified [their] convenient

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\(^9\) Ibid., 7.

solutions by invoking simple stories.”¹¹ Indian tribes were a common scapegoat. In the 1960s and 1970s, State Attorney General Slade Gorton had fought to dismantle the treaty rights of local tribes to hunt salmon and steelhead, but his legal battles had backfired in court rulings that ended up according the tribes 50 percent of all salmon and steelhead catch. These rulings also gave the tribes greater responsibility for fishery management and repopulation.¹² In a campaign that appealed simultaneously to bitter non-Indian fishers and public perception that the salmon population was seriously in danger, Initiative 456 proposed to remove the tribes’ special rights to hunt and manage these fish. Though it oversimplified the ecological issues threatening salmon and misrepresented the role of the tribes, Initiative 456 passed in the state by seven points.¹³ It failed in King County, but by only a small margin, and the number of King County residents who voted yes were more than double the statewide margin by which the initiative had passed.¹⁴ There are therefore still practical reasons to evaluate education around the issue in King County.

Most recently, in a special election in April 2014, Proposition 1 called for a popular decision on raising taxes to avoid cuts to public transit. This measure came after years of what many saw as state mismanagement of transit revenue: transit funding had long relied on revenue from increasing sales taxes in Washington, and had arguably grown at a faster rate than the services King County Metro promised to provide.¹⁵ The discrepancy resulted largely from the ongoing income demands of the transit drivers’ union, who Prop 1 opponents criticized as overpaid,¹⁶ though a driver’s average yearly salary was only $50,000.¹⁷ Opponents of the proposition asserted that funding cuts would force the transit system to do more with less; proponents retorted that such a solution was unrealistic, especially given that a smaller transit system would attract less public support for future improvement projects.¹⁸ Proponents of Prop 1 had explicitly connected the initiative to the issue of resource conservation,¹⁹ but popular conversations were directed at the issue of fiscal efficiency rather than the environmental sustainability of transportation systems. The proposition failed in King County by seven points, with district-wide support coming mostly from Seattle and Lake Forest Park—two areas seen

¹² Ibid., 243.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Seattle Times Editorial, “Editorial: King County Metro Transit still has work to do; vote no on Prop 1.” The Seattle Times (Seattle, WA), April 5 2014.
¹⁶ Ibid.
as benefiting the most from Metro Transit. The special election had a turnout rate of 38 percent.

“For an Informed Electorate”: Traditional Resources for Citizenship Education

Voters in urban, suburban and rural areas of King County certainly have a wide variety of resources for information on current political issues, and obviously not all are institutional. Less formal avenues of education, such as word of mouth, cannot be documented without more intensive study. When citizens subject to misinformation are held responsible for educating themselves, however, formal resources are no doubt what the critics have in mind. This research therefore focuses on information put out by the state, media organizations and political campaigns, as well as formal discussions such as town hall meetings.

Within Seattle in the 1970s and 1980s, the predominant independent sources for political news were no doubt the Times and Post-Intelligencer. Given these papers’ circulations, they must have also reached some households outside Seattle, but cities outside Seattle appear to have been served mainly by local news sources. (The circulation of the Times in 1970, for instance, was 310,860, somewhat lower than the likely number of Seattle adults.) Local papers not only provided information about ballot issues, but also included sections for letters to the editor, often a viable site of civic education.

Since the popularization of the Internet, media access in King County has changed notably. Western Washington now has the highest percentage of adults in the U.S. who go online for local news, so an analysis of available information for King County voters in 2014 must draw on internet search results as well as information from local papers and political publications. But in both an analysis of print news in 1970 and 1984, and of online and print news in 2014, an alarming trend emerges: coverage of popular initiatives relating to conservation particularly reporting of relevant environmental information—is in these cases difficult for non-Seattleites to access, when such coverage exists at all.

What Initiative?: A Summary of Media Coverage

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24 Ibid.


In the month leading up to elections in 1970, *The Seattle Times* ran six short articles about the controversial, confusing recycling initiative.27 28 29 30 31 32 A survey of papers in suburban and rural areas, though, reveals much less reporting (this survey looked at the *Auburn Globe-News, Bellevue American, Highline News, Northshore Citizen, Issaquah Press, Kent News-Journal, Renton Record-Chronicle, and Eastside Journal*). Two of these local papers made absolutely no mention of the initiative, and one did so only to mistake it for an abortion bill.33 Each of the remaining papers had only one article on the initiative, though in one paper three short letters to the editor appeared.34 35 36 Of these articles, all but one were released within the week before election day, hardly leaving much time for citizens to “educate themselves” about the conservation issues surrounding the measure.

Initiative 456, perhaps because of the Indian rights controversy that made it a contentious social issue, received somewhat more reporting. Both the *Times* and the *Post-Intelligencer* ran months-long coverage of the initiative’s momentum, publishing nearly an article every day in the month leading up to the election. But this frequency only makes the coverage in local papers look more bizarre (papers surveyed were the *Kent News-Journal, Issaquah Press, Highline Times, Northshore Citizen, Bellevue Journal American, and Mercer Island Reporter*). Again, two of the surveyed papers made no mention of the initiative whatsoever, though one urged a *no* vote without any explanation.37 In the remaining papers, there was an average of two staff articles covering Initiative 456 in the pre-election month.38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 36 It’s important to remember,

again, that most King County residents outside Seattle probably did not rely on the *Times* or *Post-Intelligencer* for political news.

To contrast, voters throughout King County in 2014—granted that they could access the Internet at home, the library or another location—may use a search client such as Google to learn about Proposition 1. Such searches return tens of articles from well-regarded information sources throughout the county. Local print newspapers, in the month leading up to election day, varied in their coverage of the issue: the *Mercer Island Reporter* and *Issaquah Press*, for instance, both published multiple pieces, whereas the *Bothell Reporter* relied on letters to the editor and *Westside Weekly* had no coverage at all. Still, it may appear that access to the Internet levels the informational field for King County residents. To test this idea we must turn to an analysis of article content, and of the complexity of online engagement.

**News, Editorials and the Big Picture**

When environmental initiatives have received coverage, that coverage has tended to report points of political contention in the initiative campaigns themselves, rather than the context of environmental issues at hand. Take the case of Initiative 256: the few articles in October/November 1970 about the initiative focused on a smoke-screen of economic fairness issues. In a few pieces, conservationist labels were invoked—the initiative “warms the hearts of environmentalists,” according to one—but actual data on or theories about conservation, such as the long-term stakes and effects of recycling, were never discussed. Only one piece in *The Seattle Times* described a study that pertained to recycling. Similarly, in 1984, though the *Times* and *Post-Intelligencer* touched on the recent history of salmon and trout conservation while covering the initiative, most articles in those and other King County papers did not. A short piece in the *Journal American* came the closest to explaining the complexity of the issue—it quoted a Fisheries employee as saying the “real culprits” for depleted fish populations were “dams,

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47 Heffter, Emily. “Voters to decide on tax, fee hikes for roads, buses.” *Issaquah Press* (Issaquah, WA), March 27 2014.
48 Grady, Mary L. “Transit vote will affect Islanders.” *Mercer Island Reporter* (Mercer Island, WA), April 16 2014.
49 Cero, Mike. “Yes on Prop. 1 will not help fight against tolls.” *Mercer Island Reporter* (Mercer Island, WA), April 9 2014.
pollution, changes in weather and other forces far beyond the influence of Indians— but even this quote did little more than point fingers in the opposite direction.

A review of the reporting on Proposition 1 reveals that, detailed though these articles may be with respect to tax and efficiency issues, very few touch on the environmental context associated with transit funding and cuts. Those that do (and they do so minimally) are published in Seattle-focused outlets such as Cross Cut and The Stranger. No reasonable observer would expect a resident of Enumclaw or Issaquah to seek out articles from these publications, whether in print or online, any more than they would expect every Seattle voter to supplement their news with The Highline Times. In all three cases described in this paper, non-Seattleite voters have been put at a disadvantage in using independent media to learn about the environmental context of political proposals. It is important now to compare these resources to resources sponsored by the state and by political campaigns during election season.

A Discrepancy in Informational Resources: Does the Environment Matter?

During the election seasons of 1970, 1984 and 2014, campaign rhetoric surrounding proposed initiatives relied significantly (though never entirely) on appeals to dire conservation concerns. Figures 1 and 2 (see final page), posters from the Initiative 256 campaign, explicitly stress the health of local land and environmental resources. Such rhetoric has little in common with the messaging provided by independent media, which focused on economic interests, industry corruption, and the beautification of local neighborhoods. In a more sinister case, the campaign to pass Initiative 456 relied heavily on flooding newspapers with editorial letters that appeared to come from peers. These letters “were highly consistent in expressing…[that] the fish resource is in serious trouble (because of…Indian fishing practices).” 77 of these letters were sent in total. Finally, the special elections in 2014 to decide Proposition 1 were intentionally held on Earth Day, implying important environmental stakes in the proposition. The supporting letter on the ballot was written by Denis Hayes, himself the founder of Earth Day.

Of course, political rhetoric in each of these campaigns also stressed the non-environmental issues that later became predominant in independent media. But there is a noticeable disconnect between the emphasis on conservation issues in political literature and the lack of coverage of such issues in independent media, particularly outside the

58 Ibid., 96.
Seattle metropolitan area. These disconnects may have seriously impeded the ability of voters to educate themselves about the relevance of environmental concerns to their decisions at the polls.

**Why These Inequalities?**

There is no doubt that adequate access to informational resources about environmental issues could have impacted the outcomes of each of the initiatives described in this paper, as significant uncertainty surrounded voters in each case. Whereas 81.5 percent of Washingtonians surveyed before the 1970 election season planned to vote for Initiative 256, a significant number later chose to oppose or not vote on the initiative; 43 percent of these said that they opposed because “the initiative was not clear.”

A few weeks before election day in 1984, a poll revealed that 58 percent of King County residents had no idea how to vote on Initiative 456—a higher number of undecided voters than in any other county. However, if they were like most other Americans, King County residents at this time did have a significant concern for human impact on marine life and believed that they themselves would benefit from fish conservation: in other words, their uncertainty could not have been due to apathy. Today, Americans have a similar confusion over environmental strategies about transport: though 63 percent believe that more mass transit and carpool can significantly help the environment, Americans in a separate study ranked funding for public transit as much less important than other high-tech conservation solutions. If better environmental education resources had been available in these election years, they may have helped King County voters resolve uncertainties such as these and vote to maximize environmental benefit, or at least have deterred them from voting to reduce it.

This paper attempts to highlight an existing hypocrisy that exists in conservation politics in King County: that while the doctrine of conservation is invoked in popular initiatives as if it were a great unifying force, as if those who did not take political action in favor of conservation were simply choosing to be ill-informed, resources for learning about conservation issues in politics are unequal and sparse. Coverage of environmentally-oriented ballot measures in independent media outside Seattle has been lacking, and when such coverage does exist, it ignores contextual information about the environment essential to citizens’ self-teaching. Ultimately, in the cases studied here, conservationism has failed to provide a motivator for county-wide collective action.

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because of the insufficiency of educational resources—*not* because of the refusal of voters to educate themselves.

Figure 1.\textsuperscript{65}

![Figure 1](image1.jpg)

Figure 2.\textsuperscript{66}

![Figure 2](image2.jpg)


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
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