

EFFECTS OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON VOTER BEHAVIOR WASHINGTON VOTER INITIATIVE I-522, 2013: “LABELING OF FOODS CONTAINING GENETICALLY ENGINEERED ORGANISMS”

Millions of dollars are invested in political campaign advertisements because they are very effective in communicating political messages to the public. This report provides an example of how expenditures in political advertising affect voter behavior and election outcome during a campaign. Washington ballot Initiative 522, labeling of genetically-engineered foods, was the most expensive initiative in Washington State’s history. The impact of campaign spending on voter behavior during the I-522 election is illustrated in this paper.

Campaign spending and voting pattern

LWVWA Initiative and Referendum Study released in the Fall 2002 stated that:

“In Washington, of the 37 initiated measures enacted since 1975, seven were passed even though advocates were outspent by opponents. In his book, Democracy Derailed: Initiative Campaigns and the Power of Money, syndicated columnist David S. Broder writes, “Money does not always prevail in initiative fights, but it is almost always a major—even dominant factor. Like so much else in American politics, the costs of these ballot battles have escalated enormously in the past decade. To a large extent, it is only those individuals and interest groups with access to big dollars who can play in the arena the Populists and Progressives created in order to balance the scales against the big-bucks operators.” He goes on to say, “...millionaires have ...found the initiative handy for ‘empowering’ voters to endorse the initiatives’ sponsors’ agendas.”¹

The total amount of campaign spending for Washington Initiative-522 was approximately \$42.5 million. Expenditures by “Yes-on-522” were \$9.8 million and by “No-on-522” were \$32.7 million^{2,3}. “No-on-522” outspent the “Yes-on-522” campaign by more than 300%. The majority of contributors to “No-on-522” were chemical companies and the Grocery Manufacturers Association and its members, all from outside of Washington. According to the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission, fewer than ten Washingtonians contributed to the No-to-522 campaign. The campaign price tag of \$42.5 million was the most expensive ballot initiative in Washington State’s history, with potential voters besieged by television, internet and direct mail ads. By September 2013, the “No-on-522” campaign had raised \$12

¹ "Direct Democracy: The Initiative and Referendum Process in Washington." Page 7. *The League of Women Voters of Washington*, Oct. 2002, <http://www.lwvwa.org/pdfs/studies/init-ref-study.pdf>, viewed 12/30/15.

² "Washington Mandatory Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food Measure, Initiative 522 (2013)." *Ballotpedia*. *Lucy Burns Institute*, https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Mandatory_Labeling_of_Genetically_Engineered_Food_Measure,_Initiative_522_%282013%29, viewed 12/30/15.

³ Committees/Initiatives/2013 Database. *Washington State Public Disclosure Commission*, viewed 8/15/15

million from six donors^{4,5}. The “Yes-on-522” campaign had raised about \$4 million from more than 9,000 donors^{6,7}.

Elway Research is an independent, non-partisan, public opinion research firm which tracks trends in Washington State and the Northwest. They interviewed 405 registered voters in Washington on September 4 and 5, 2013, regarding I-522 and then repeated the process with 415 voters on October 14 and 15, 2013^{8,9}. Their poll study showed that “Yes-on-522” had a 44% lead over “No-on-522” in September, but one month later the “Yes-on-522” lead dropped by 20% and “No-on-522” gained 20%.

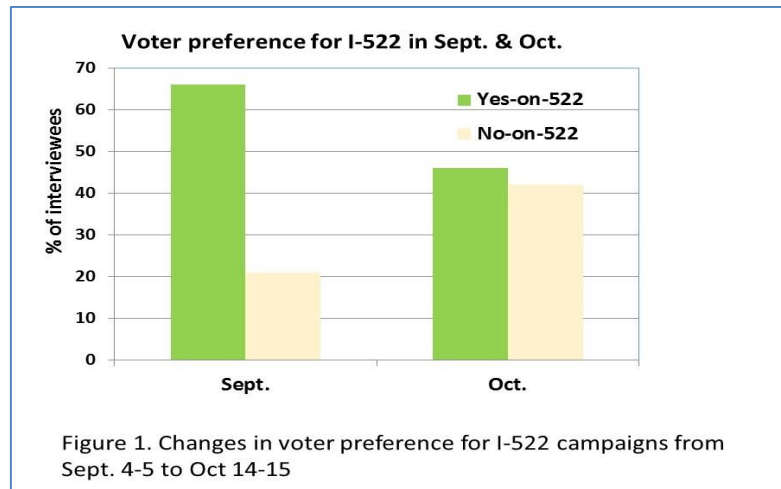


Figure 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gibson, C. Robert. "Washingtonians Fight for GMO Labeling." *The Blog. Huffington Post*, 30 Sept. 2013. Web. 15 Aug. 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-gibson/washingtonians-fight-for-_b_4006054.html , viewed 02/14/16

⁶ Public Disclosure Commission, Op. Cit.

⁷ Gibson, Op. Cit.

⁸ November Initiative Holding Big Leads, *The Elway Poll*, Sep 10, 2013.

⁹ "I-522: Support for Food Labeling Initiative Swings Negative 41 Points Since September", *The Elway Poll*, Oct 21, 2013.

From Sept. 4 to Oct. 14, “No-on-522” spent \$7.5 million and “Yes-on-522” spent \$2.1 million, nearly a 4 to 1 margin (Figure 2).

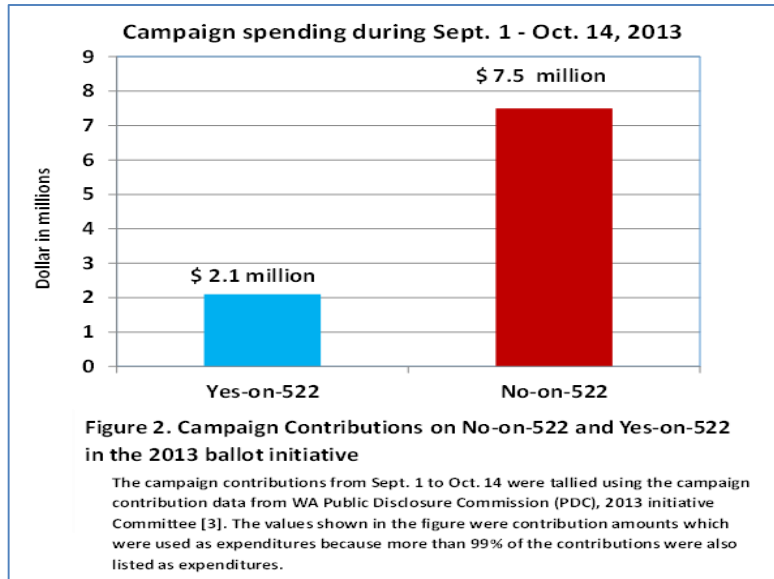
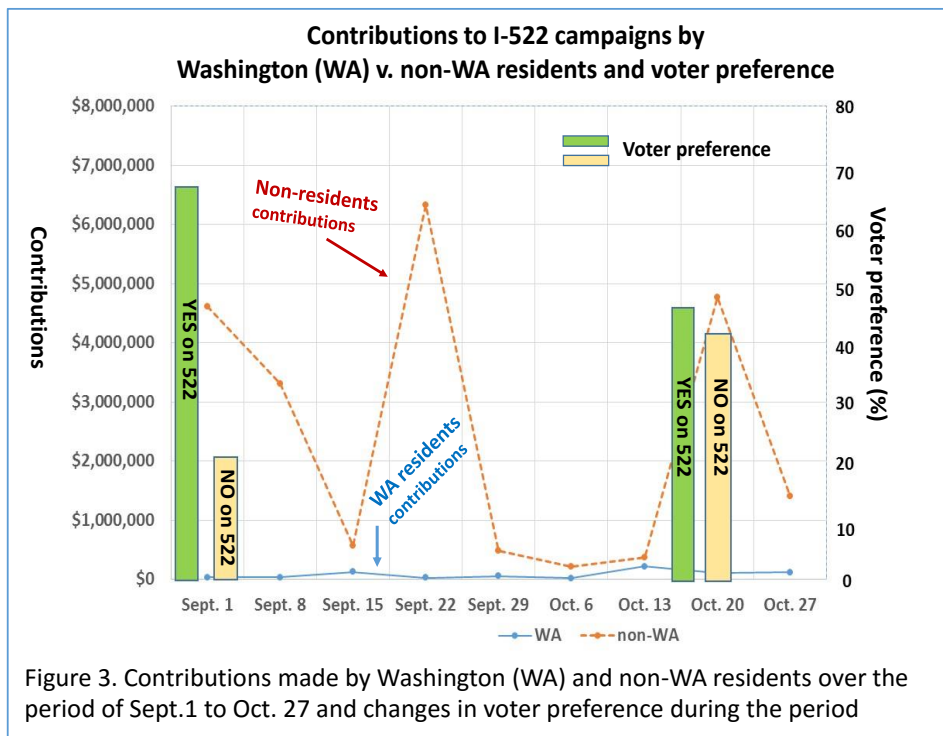


Figure 2.



Data from WA Public Disclosure Commission, Initiative I-522

Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows contributions made by Washington (WA, blue line) and non-WA residents (red broken line) over the period of Sept.1 to Oct. 27 when the Elway polls were taken. The figure depicts the contribution trend and the changes in voter preference during the period.

The influence of campaign ads on voter behavior

The next 3 tables show how voter behavior changes after exposure (or non-exposure) to the campaign ads of “No-on-522” and “Yes-on-522”.

Table 1. Changes in inclined to Vote on I-522 and the election result

Initiative 522	Yes-on-522	No-on-522	Undecided
September	66%	21%	21%
October	46%	42%	12%
Election Result	48.9%	51.1%	0%

Data from Elway Poll in Sept. and Oct. 2013 and the election results from Ballotpedia.org^{10, 11, 12}

Elway described the result of the poll on October 21, 2013 as: “What a difference a month and a few million dollars makes. Initiative 522, which would mandate labeling genetically modified food, was leading by just 4 points last week after posting a 45 point lead five weeks ago - before the advertising campaign had begun”.

Table 2. Voting preference on I-522 by campaign advertising seen

The poll taken in Oct 14-15, 2013	Percent of responders
At the time of polling	
Seen I-522 campaign ads	81%
Seen no campaign ads	19%
Among 81% seen I-522 campaign ads	
Seen both ads	56%
Seen only Yes-on-522 ads	10%
Seen only No-on-522 ads	14%
Among 56% seen BOTH ads	
Plan to vote for Yes-on-522	43%
Plan to vote for No-on-522	47%
Among the voters seen only ONE side ads	
Vote for Yes-on-522, seen only the ads	75%
Vote for No-on-522, seen only the ads	75%
Among 19% seen NO ADS	
Vote FOR	67%
Vote AGAINST	23%

Data from Elway Poll Oct 14 to 15, 2013¹³

¹⁰ “November Initiative Holding Big Lead”, *Elway Poll*, Sept. 10, 2013

¹¹ “I-522: Support for Food Labeling Initiative Swings Negative 41 Points since September”, *Elway Poll*, Oct.21, 2013

¹² “Washington Mandatory Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food Measure, Initiative 522 (2013)”, *Ballotpedia.org*,

[https://ballotpedia.org/Washington Mandatory Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food Measure, Initiative 522 %282013%29](https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Mandatory_Labeling_of_Genetically_Engineered_Food_Measure,_Initiative_522_%282013%29), viewed 02/14/16

¹³ I-522: Support for Food Labeling Initiative Swings Negative 41 Points since September, *The Elway Poll*, Oct 21, 2013.

Among the 19% of the voters who saw no ads, 67% voted “Yes-on-522” and 32% voted “No-on-522”. This percentage of YES voters was the same margin the “Yes-on-522” side had 5 weeks before the advertising campaigns had begun. During the two-week run-up to Election Day, supporters of “No-on-522” contributed \$4.77 million v. supporters of “Yes-on-522”, \$1.64 million¹⁴. The I-522 election outcome was 51.1% voted “No-on-522” and 48.9% voted “Yes-on-522”. A similar trend of campaign spending and election outcome was observed in California’s Proposition 37 to label foods containing Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) in 2012. The “AGAINST 37” campaign outspent the “FOR 37” by a ratio of 7 to 1. The “AGAINST 37” spent \$44 million vs. \$7.3 million spent by the “FOR 37” side. The outcome of Proposition 37 was 51% voted “AGAINST” to 49% voted “FOR,” matching the results in Washington.

	<u>Definitely YES</u>	<u>probably YES</u>	<u>undecided</u>	<u>Probably NO</u>	<u>Definitely NO</u>
(Sept. 3 – 5) SEPT poll	43%	23%	12%	10%	11%
(Oct. 15-17) OCT poll	37%	9%	12%	9%	33%

Elway Sept. 2013 and Oct. 2013 polls^{15, 16}.

The next figure and table 4 show data obtained from Washington State Public Disclosure Commission, Initiatives 2002 to 2014 and the Yearly Summary of Initiative to the People Approved/Rejected^{17, 18}.

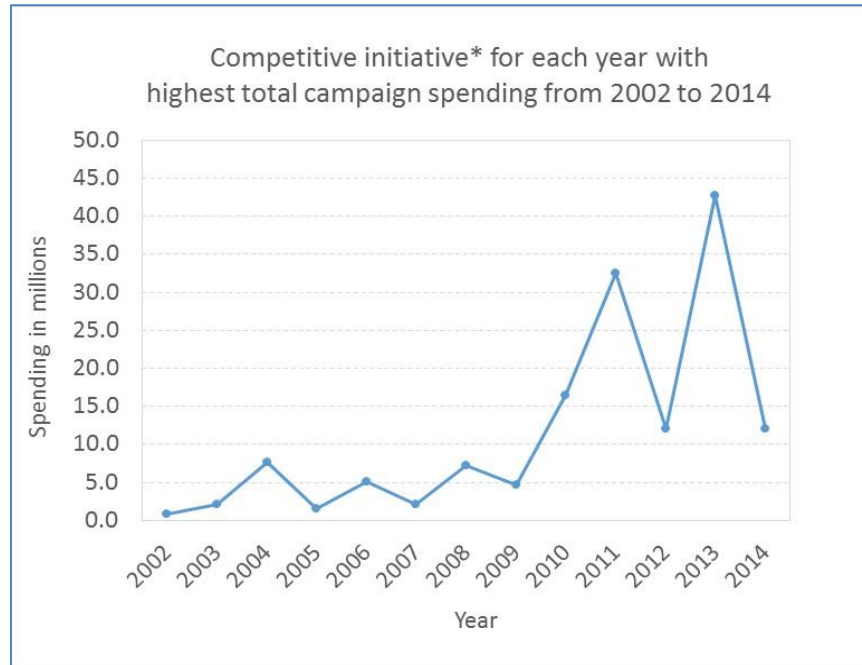
¹⁴ "Washington Mandatory Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food Measure, Initiative 522 (2013)." *Ballotpedia*, *Lucy Burns Institute*, https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Mandatory_Labeling_of_Genetically_Engineered_Food_Measure,_Initiative_522_%282013%29, viewed 02/14/16.

¹⁵ "November Initiative Holding Big Lead", *Elway Poll*, Sept. 10, 2013

¹⁶ "I-522: Support for Food Labeling Initiative Swings Negative 41 Points since September", *Elway Poll*, Oct.21, 2013

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ "Yearly Summary of Initiatives to the Legislature, Approve/Rejected", Washington State Secretary of State, 15 Aug. 2015, <http://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/initiatives/Yearly%20Summary%20IL%2012-14.pdf>, viewed 12/30/15.



Data from Washington State Public Disclosure Commission, Initiatives 2002 to 2014.

*Competitive initiative requires campaigns “For” and “Against”

Table 4. Competitive Initiative* with highest campaign spending

Year	Initiative	FOR (\$ million)	AGAINST (\$ million)	Status
2002	776	0.42	0.38	Approved
2003	841	1.5	0.5	Approved
2004	892	1.15	6.6	Rejected
2005	901	1.6	0.03	Approved
2006	933	1.2	3.8	Rejected
2007	960	1.2	0.8	Approved
2008	1000	5.5	1.7	Approved
2009	1033	1	3.5	Rejected
2010	1107	16	0.4	Approved
2011	1183	20.1	12.3	Approved
2012	1240	11.4	0.7	Approved
2013	522	9.9	32.9	Rejected
2014	594	11.4	0.6	Approved