POLITICS

We still don't know the outcome of Proposition 1. Why is the vote so close?

By **Sophia Bollag** , Politics Reporter, Sacramento
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California Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks at a press conference to urge voters to vote yes on Proposition 1, a $6.4 billion bond to fund substance abuse treatment facilities at the SEIU 2015 local offices in San Francisco on March 4.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Two days after the election, Californians still don't know whether Proposition 1, the mental health bond measure, will become law.

On Thursday, vote tallies showed Proposition 1 winning by a single percentage point, with 50.5% in favor and 49.5% against.

It's not unusual for California election results to take days or even weeks to determine, but the close race for Prop. 1 has many Californians scratching their heads. Supporters of the measure had millions of dollars in campaign cash and the backing of the state's most powerful politicians, including Gov. Gavin Newsom, the proposition's chief supporter. And polls leading up to the election consistently showed it likely to pass.

In hindsight, political observers point to two key factors that made the measure a tough sell to many voters: complexity and cost.

Tim Rosales, a Republican political consultant based in California, said support campaigns are inherently more difficult than opposition campaigns because people default to voting no.

"The 'no' side has a much easier time," Rosales said. "They just have to raise a red flag or doubt."

Rosales said he's worked for campaigns against ballot measures where they went through ballot measures line by line with focus groups until they found a single sentence voters were unsure about. That's enough to fuel a whole opposition campaign, he said.

"That's all we'll talk about — that one sentence," Rosales said. "That's enough"

Prop. 1 provided many sentences with opportunities to sow doubt. The measure was so long that the Secretary of State's Office estimated it could add $7 million to the cost of the election because of the number of additional pages in the voter guides mailed to Californians. In the end, the measure took up 68 full pages.

It would authorize $6.38 billion in bond funding to build housing and residential treatment facilities for people with mental illness. It also would divert more of the state's mental health budget into care for severe mental illness that will likely come at the expense of some programs that provide preventative or lower-level services.

At stake is money from the Mental Health Services Act, which voters passed in 2004 to levy a 1% tax on people whose incomes exceed $1 million. The tax typically nets $2 billion-$3.5 billion for mental health services each year. Under current law, most of the funding goes to counties, which have significant discretion to spend the money as they see fit.

Prop. 1 would shift more of the funding to state government control and would increase the amount counties must spend on housing and services for people with severe mental illness and addiction. It's impossible to say which specific programs will lose funding and which will gain, decisions that will be made if the measure passes.

The impact of the measure is unclear even for the programs that would be affected by it, including Buckelew Programs, a mental health and addiction treatment provider in the North Bay that gets a significant chunk of its funding from the MHSA tax.

Buckelew CEO Chris Kughn said even some of his staffers and members of the nonprofit's board of directors didn't understand how the measure would affect programs like theirs.

"It was a confusing measure," Kughn said. "I even had some staff members not 100% sure on what the impact would be, so I think that was not communicated clearly."

Supporters of Prop. 1 argue the measure is needed to address the current reality on California streets, where addiction and mental illness are often intertwined and exacerbated by the state's housing shortage. They say more money must be spent on people with the most severe problems.

Opponents argue such a shift will cut funding from prevention services, which they say save people from needing higher-level care in the first place. And they argue that now is a bad time for the state to take on bond debt, considering its massive budget deficit.

Supporters spent more than $12 million on their campaign, while opponents haven't reported spending anything.

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Rosales praised the campaign's messaging strategy, saying that highlighting support from law enforcement officials like Sacramento Sheriff Jim Cooper and increased funding for homeless veterans was a good play. But ultimately, he said the campaign's challenge was convincing Californians that this complex measure would solve the even more complex issue of homelessness.

Kughn sees the measure's provisions to integrate mental health care and addiction treatment as an improvement from the current system. But he said it's unclear how it might cut or add funding for programs like his. Buckelew operates intensive residential treatment for people having a mental health crisis and other residential treatment programs, which could see increased funding. But the measure could also cut from some preventative services offered by his organization, specifically a suicide prevention hotline funded by MHSA dollars.

Turnout in the primary has been low, and low-turnout primary electorates tend to skew older and more conservative. Current vote tallies show the measure winning in coastal counties, which skew more liberal, and failing in more conservative inland areas.

Though the numbers will increase in the coming weeks as all the votes are tallied, at the moment turnout looks low, with votes tallied so far representing less than 20% of registered voters.

The Public Policy Institute of California surveyed residents Feb. 6-13 and found 59% of likely voters said they would vote for it. But lead pollster Mark Baldassare noted that the same poll also found voters were not excited about the idea of passing a bond, with only 51% saying they thought it was a "good time" to do so.

Baldassare also pointed to Newsom's low approval rating of 48% among likely voters and the fact that many of the Prop. 1 ads featured the governor.

If the measure fails, it would mark Newsom's second losing bond effort in a row after voters rejected his $15 billion school bond in 2020.

That measure "failed because it was a bond at the start of a pandemic when people are scared about finances," Baldassare said. "Now we have a bond when we're hearing we've got a money problem."

Melissa Michelson, a political science professor at Menlo College in Atherton, said she believes the votes are so close because voters are torn between addressing two compelling issues facing the state: the state's housing and mental health crisis and the budget deficit.

The yes campaign's efforts to appeal to conservative voters by emphasizing law enforcement backing of the measure and its funding for veteran housing likely weren't enough to overcome Republican

voters' negative views of Newsom, she said.

On top of that, many voters seemed confused by the complex measure, which likely led more people to vote no.

"If you, as a voter, are overwhelmed or confused by a ballot proposition, you will vote no because if you vote no, nothing changes," she said. "Any campaign consultant will tell you, the best way to kill a ballot initiative is to confuse people."

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