

# The Voting Happiness Index

By Professor Matt Qvortrup



# The Voting Happiness Index

Revitalising democracy is back on the political agenda: Gordon Brown believes it is time for people and communities to 'take power from the state'<sup>1</sup>, David Cameron wants to 'let the people into the citadels of power'<sup>2</sup> and the Liberal Democrats promise 'more power to you.'<sup>3</sup> In the post-Blair era, politicians appear to be queuing up to devolve power to the people. Concrete proposals may still be thin on the ground but the positive rhetoric from political parties indicates that there is an appetite for democratic reform.

That there is a serious malaise with British democracy is unarguable. Between 2000 and 2006, the Labour Party lost a member every 20 minutes<sup>4</sup> and the Conservatives have dropped by one million in the last 20 years<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, more people are joining campaign groups and taking part in single-issue politics. The percentage of the population who had taken part in a demonstration rose from 6% in 1974 to 13% in 2000; Friends of the Earth had 1,000 members in 1971 but 119,000 by 2002 and the National Trust's membership grew from 278,000 in 1971 to 3m in 2002. In the last five years, Britain has also seen three massive campaign events – the Countryside Alliance demonstration in 2002 with 400,000 people, the Stop the War demonstration in 2003 with 1.5m people and the Live 8 event in 2005 with 150,000 people.<sup>6</sup>

There is no sign of this trend slowing while people continue to feel excluded from politics. More than 2,000 extra people joined CND in the last six months of last year<sup>7</sup> as the debate – or lack of it – about replacing Trident moved up the political agenda. And, more recently, petitions hit the headlines when more than 1.8 million people opposed the Government's road pricing plans on Downing Street's own website. Tens of thousands of people also signed e-petitions on everything from ID cards to inheritance tax.

The truth is that people are not apathetic. They care more than ever about the important issues that affect their lives – and politicians are starting to realise that. The e-petition website may have been intended as a publicity stunt but its success has let a democratic genie out of the bottle. The petitions have been so successful that the planned response – an email to all signatories – may not be enough. People, having had a taste of power, are demanding more.

In this climate, one proposal that could find its way into the party manifestos at the next election is the Citizens' Initiative – allowing referendums to be triggered by a petition of voters. It would certainly provide the Government with a response to the road pricing petition. What is more, it would give everyone – not just the petitioners – a real say over important issues that affect their lives. The system already operates in other countries around the world including Switzerland, New Zealand, Hungary and 24 US states.

But what would it mean for Britain if Citizens' Initiatives were introduced? The experience in other countries shows that their use does not lead to a predictable set of policy outcomes. Just as in general elections, voters do not appear to have any particular ideological preference: sometimes their votes are for centre-right measures, sometimes the opposite. And Citizens' Initiatives are not, as critics often claim, more likely to lead to populist legislation and ill-considered laws. They allow for open debates and for the facts to be properly aired and discussed in public, not behind closed doors. They result in people being better informed and making considered decisions.

<sup>1</sup> G Brown *Speech to Labour Party conference*, 25 September 2006 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5378312.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5378312.stm)

<sup>2</sup> D Cameron *Speech to the Power Inquiry conference* 6 May 2006 [www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj\\_id=129626](http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=129626)

<sup>3</sup> Slogan – see [www.libdems.org.uk/government](http://www.libdems.org.uk/government)

<sup>4</sup> W Woodward, *Contender for Labour deputy post highlights 160,000 lost members*, The Guardian, 27 December 2006

<sup>5</sup> The Power Inquiry, *Power to the People*, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust 2006

<sup>6</sup> All from The Power Inquiry *Power to the People*

<sup>7</sup> Figure supplied by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Beyond the impact on policy and political debate, there is evidence to suggest that Citizens' Initiatives can have a positive effect on something much more abstract and, some would argue, more important to people's everyday lives. Citizens' Initiatives appear to make people happier.

If devolving power to the people is one major political idea of the moment, wellbeing is another. David Cameron said he wanted to focus on GWB – General Wellbeing – not just GDP, arguing that: “Improving our society's sense of wellbeing is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times.”<sup>8</sup> That led Will Wilkinson, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, to write in Prospect magazine that, “With Cameron's endorsement, the cockle-warming politics of happiness has officially become a multi-partisan affair”<sup>9</sup>, and there has certainly been no shortage of pronouncements on everything from work-life balance to exercise and healthy eating. Discussing Cameron's lead over Gordon Brown in the polls, Martin Kettle wrote in the Guardian that: “Wellbeing may sound airy-fairy stuff to many traditionalists – but it could be winning the next election for the Tories.”<sup>10</sup>

Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, in their 2000 study *Happiness, Economy and Institutions*<sup>11</sup>, compared levels of self-reported happiness across Switzerland, where direct democracy is perhaps best established. As well as Citizens' Initiatives at a national level, Switzerland has provisions for direct democracy within its 26 cantons. These vary, however, so Frey and Stutzer were able to rank the cantons according to the extent of these provisions (based on factors like the number of signatures required to trigger a referendum) and found that the better the provisions for direct democracy, the happier people were.

They argued that there were two main reasons for this. First, the system means that politicians are more closely controlled and so government activity is closer to the wishes of the people, resulting in satisfaction with government and general happiness. Second, direct democracy allows citizens to become directly involved in the political process which is beneficial in itself.

The Voting Happiness Index examines whether Citizens' Initiatives have the same impact in America by comparing levels of political happiness across the states, 24 of which use the Initiative. The index uses five measures:

- LIFE SATISFACTION
- TRUST IN OTHERS
- SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY
- VOTER TURNOUT
- ECONOMIC SUCCESS.

To allow the results to be combined into an index, the results in each of the five categories above were ranked. Each state was then assigned a score out of 20 for each category, depending on its ranking. These scores combined to give a total 'happiness' score out of 100.

<sup>8</sup> D Cameron *Speech to Google Zeitgeist Europe 22 May 2006* [www.conservative-party.org.uk/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj\\_id=129957&speeches=1](http://www.conservative-party.org.uk/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=129957&speeches=1)

<sup>9</sup> W Wilkinson, *Growth is good – Don't believe everything you read – getting richer does actually make you happier*, Prospect, Oct 2006

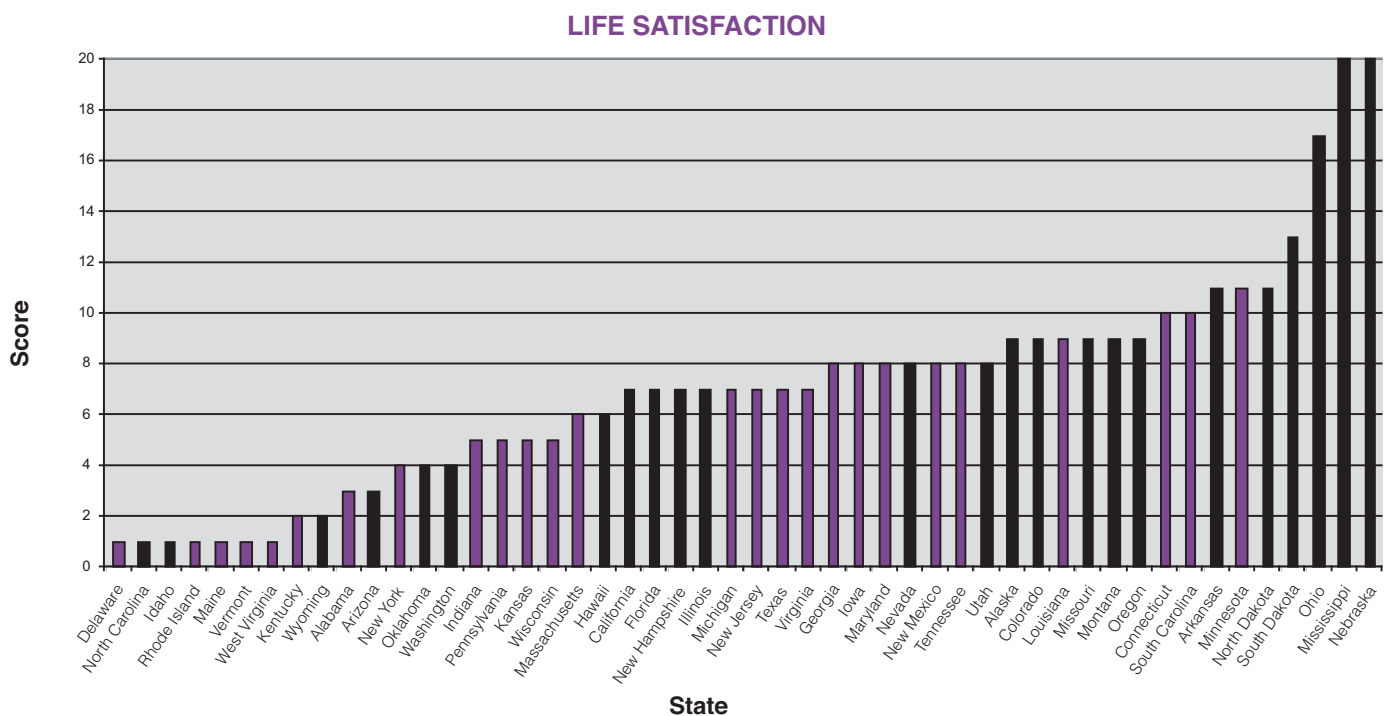
<sup>10</sup> M Kettle, Cameron has the edge. *When it comes to work-life balance, who would you choose: workaholic Gordon or Dave the dad?* The Guardian, May 23, 2006

<sup>11</sup> Frey, B and Stutzer, A (2000) *Happiness, economy and institutions* Economic Journal 110 (October)

# Life satisfaction

Although it has its critics, the simplest way to find out if someone is happy or not is to ask them. Richard Layard, in his influential book *Happiness*, writes: “by happiness I mean feeling good – enjoying life and wanting that feeling to be maintained. By unhappiness I mean feeling bad and wishing things were different.”<sup>12</sup> The best way to determine this is to ask people. Layard raises the question of whether someone who, for example, declares themselves ‘quite happy’ is using the words in the same way as everyone else. The fact that people can rate their friends’ happiness accurately suggests that they are.<sup>13</sup>

This measure uses the results of a survey which asked Americans ‘How satisfying do you find the way you are spending your life these days?’<sup>14</sup>, which fits with the definition given above. Based on the proportion of people who replied ‘Completely’, the top five states were Initiative states (shown in black) and half of all Initiative states (12) were in the top 16 places



<sup>12</sup> R Layard *Happiness. Lessons from a New Science* Penguin Books 2005, p12

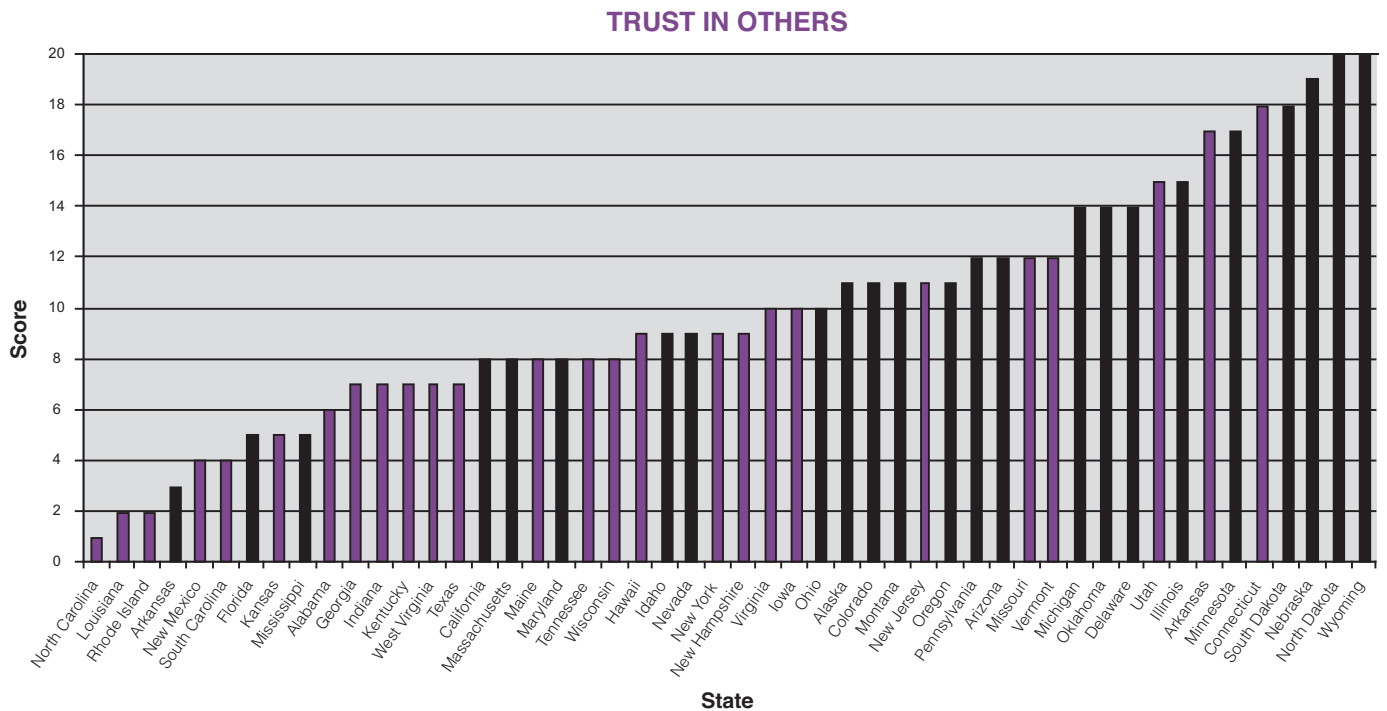
<sup>13</sup> R Layard *Happiness* p14

<sup>14</sup> American National Election Study 2000 [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)

# Trust in others

Trust in others is recognised as an important measure of happiness. Layard states simply that: “People want to trust each other...People are not like mushrooms. We are inherently social, and our happiness depends above all on the quality of our relationships with other people.” People’s views of others can be assessed by their answers to three survey questions: Are people trustworthy? Do people take advantage or act fairly? Are people helpful or selfish?<sup>15</sup> Each state’s results for the three questions are combined and translated into a trust score out of 20.

It is clear from the table below that states that use Citizens’ Initiatives are more likely to have residents who think other people are trustworthy, fair and helpful. Of the 24 Initiative states, 16 are in the top half of the graph while just eight are in the bottom half.



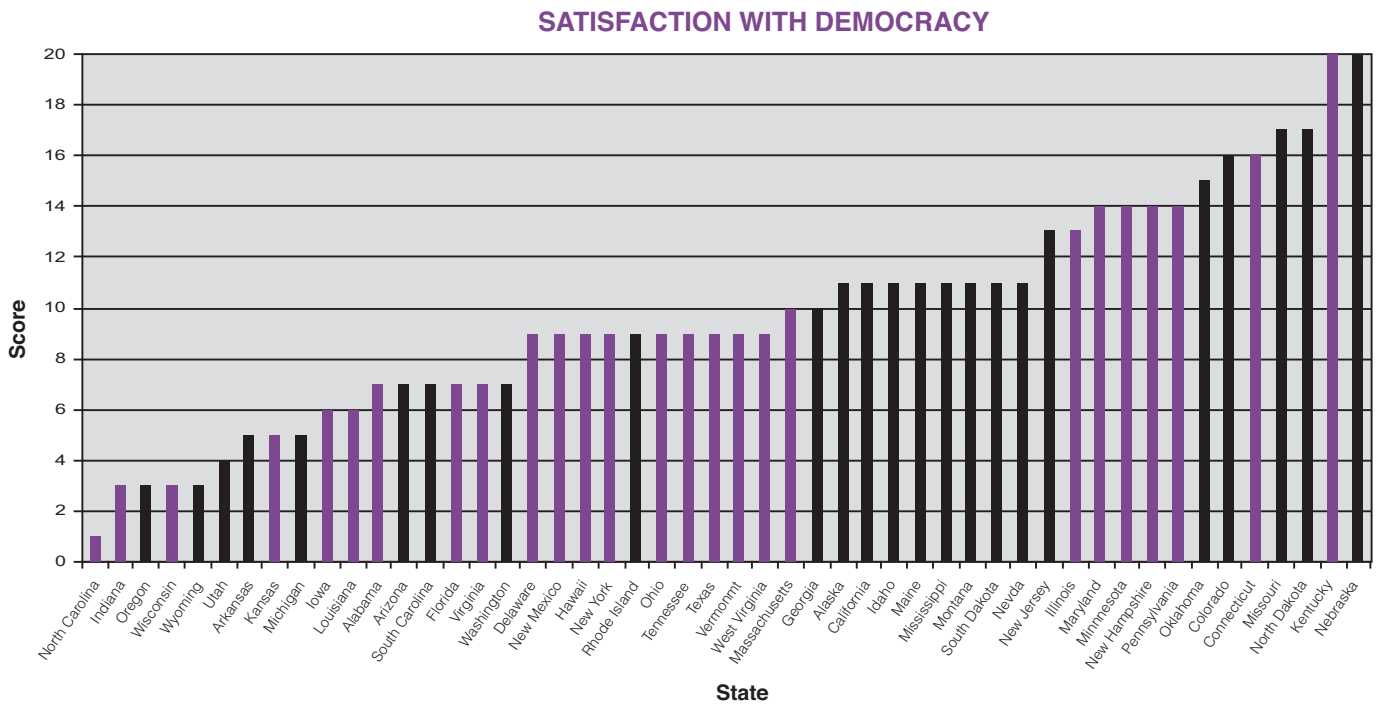
<sup>15</sup> American National Election Study 2000

<sup>16</sup> American National Election Study 2000

# Satisfaction with democracy

To focus the index more on political happiness the third, and final self-reported, measure is satisfaction with democracy. The survey used asked Americans ‘Are you satisfied with the way democracy works in the US?’<sup>16</sup> Of course in answering this question respondents may be judging the federal government as well as their state government and possibly more local levels. However, it is likely that views about state government would play a large role in their answer.

Initiative states are more likely to score highly in this category, with 15 of the 24 in the top half of all states and just nine in the lower half. Several Initiative states do score badly, however, proving that the existence of the Initiative alone is not enough to ensure satisfaction with democracy.

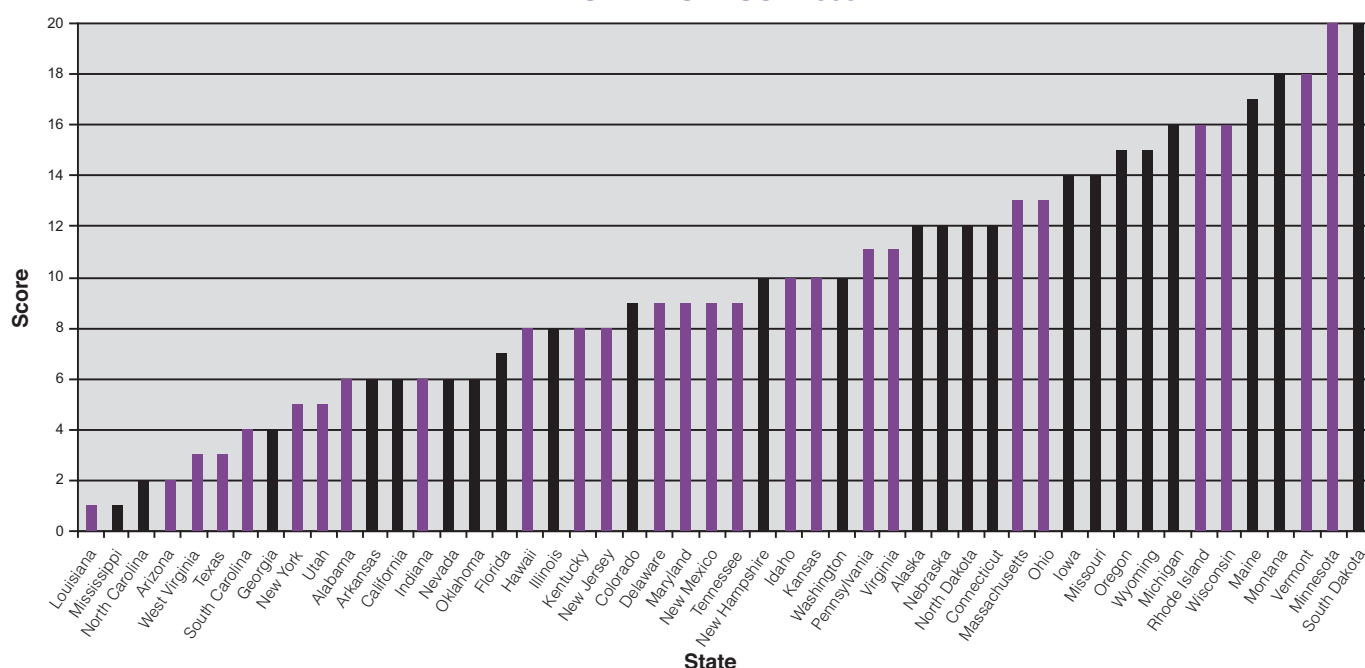


# Voter turnout

Direct democracy in the new Eastern and Central European countries has sometimes faltered because of high turnout requirements but in the US there is significant evidence that Initiatives actually boost turnout. A study by the Public Affairs Research Institute in 1992 found that voter turnout was higher in states with Initiatives on the ballot than elsewhere – 50% compared to 42%.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Daniel Smith and Caroline Tolbert found that each additional Initiative on the ballot during a midterm election in America increases turnout by an average of 1.2%. They also found that citizens were more knowledgeable, interested and engaged in politics when there were propositions on the ballot.<sup>18</sup>

The results below, based on the 2006 midterm elections, fit with this earlier evidence by showing that Initiative states are more likely to have higher turnout. The average turnout for Initiative states was 42.9% while the average for non-Initiative states was 40.3%.<sup>19</sup> Eight of the top 12 states were Initiative states while only three of the bottom 12 were.

VOTER TURNOUT 2006



<sup>17</sup> Public Affairs Research Institute, *Initiative and Referendum Analysis*, Princeton, cited in D Polhill, *Are Coloradans Fit to Make Their Own Laws? A Common-Sense Primer on the Initiative Process*, The Independence Institute, 1996.

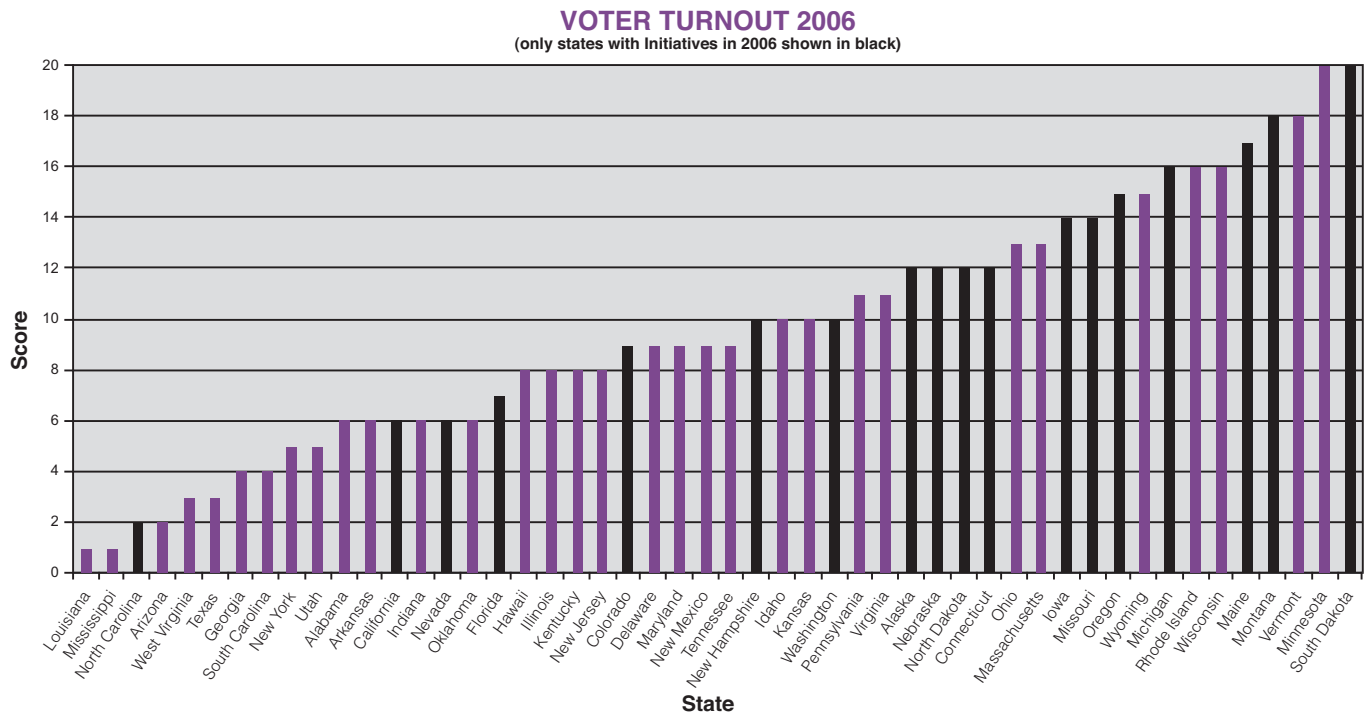
<sup>18</sup> D Smith and C Tolbert, *Educated by Initiative: The Effect of Direct Democracy on Citizens and Political Organizations in the American States*, University of Michigan Press, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Based on figures from C Gans, *Curtis Gans of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate Analyzes Election Day Voter Turnout*, American University, 2006. California, Oregon and Washington turnouts updated by the author with voting figures from state government websites (these were not complete at the time of Gans' study on 9 November 2006).



There is even more of an impact if states without Initiatives on the 2006 ballot are counted as non-Initiative states (only 18 of the 24 Initiative states were deciding on Initiatives in November last year). Initiatives are clearly not the only factor in determining turnout, with some non-Initiative states registering high turnout and some Initiative states with low numbers voting, but Initiative states do tend to experience higher turnout; 13 of the 18 (with Initiatives on the 2006 ballot) were in the top 50% of states ranked by turnout, and only one was in the bottom 25%. States with Initiatives on the ballot averaged 45.1% turnout while the 32 states without Initiatives averaged 39.6%. Turnout across the US was 40.4%.<sup>20</sup> However, for the purposes of the Index, all states with the Initiative process count as Initiative states, even if there were no Initiatives on the 2006 ballot.

Election officials in several states attributed high turnouts to the presence of controversial Initiatives on the ballot in 2006. In South Dakota, where turnout was almost 58%, there were eight Initiatives, including proposals to increase tobacco tax to fund health and education services; stop state aircraft being used for non-official business; limit property tax increases; legalise marijuana for medical use and abolish the video lottery (the state-run network of gambling machines). There was also a Popular Referendum (where citizens collected enough signatures to challenge a law passed by the legislature) on abortion. Sue Roust, auditor in South Dakota’s Minnehaha County said on election day: “The ballot issues are driving the vote. Very clearly, they bring great interest from all voters.”<sup>21</sup>



<sup>20</sup> C Gans, *Curtis Gans of American University’s Center for the Study of the American Electorate Analyzes Election Day Voter Turnout*.

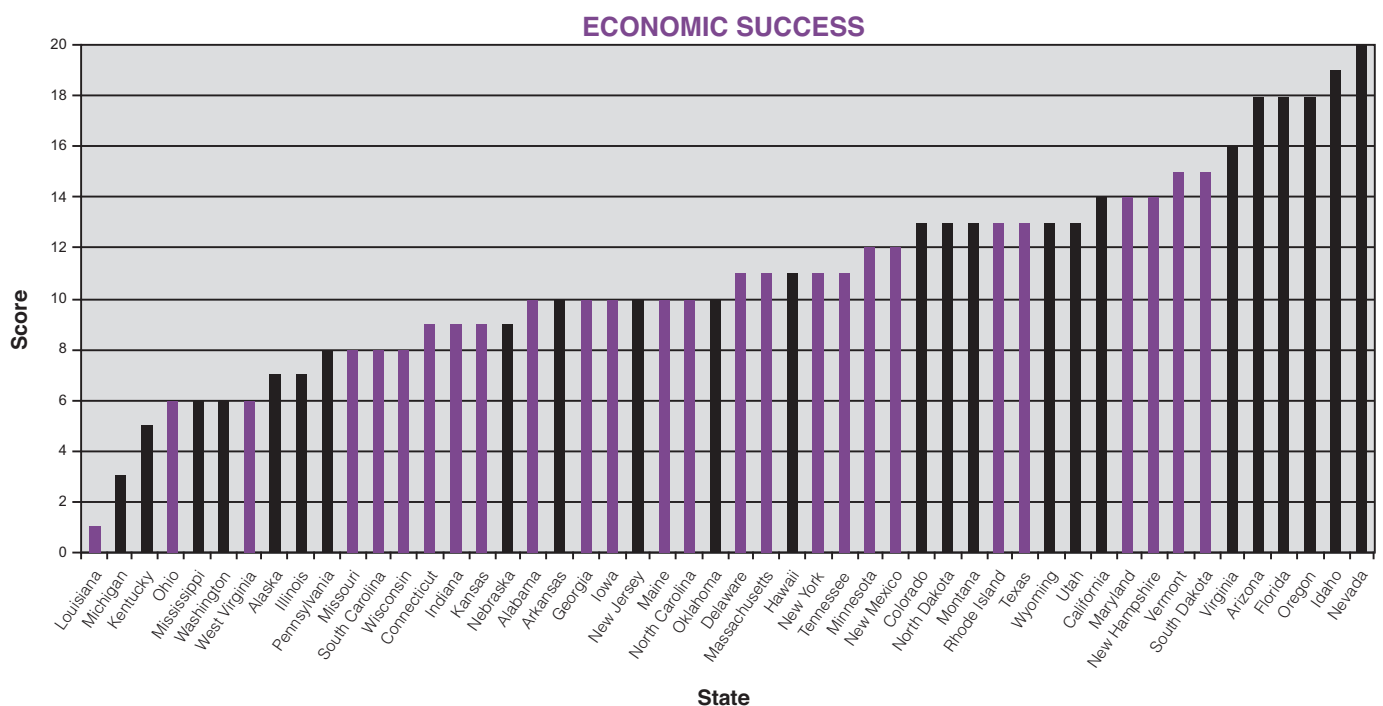
<sup>21</sup> Cited by S. Burrish, *Ballot Measures Spur High Turnout*, Sioux Falls Argus, 8 November 2006.

# Economic success

If Citizens' Initiatives make people happier and more satisfied with democracy, what other impact do they have on society? Could the presence of Initiatives help the economy to flourish, delivering prosperity to a state's residents?

Earlier research has shown the positive impact Citizens' Initiatives can have on the economy. A 2001 study by S. Brock Blomberg, Gregory D. Hess and Akila Weerapana found that Initiative states waste between 20 and 30 per cent fewer resources than non-Initiative states, leading to better economic performance.<sup>22</sup>

Looking at the period 1999-2005, Initiative states have tended to see greater economic growth. The six top states, ranked by GSP (gross state product) over that time, are all Initiative states. Looking at the raw data, the average GSP growth for non-Initiative states was 15.1% while the figure for Initiative states was 17.6%.



However, the inclusion of economic growth as a measure of happiness is one of the more controversial. Many academics argue that money really can't buy you happiness by pointing to the fact that levels of happiness have not risen in line with an increase in average incomes. But there is a counter argument, put forward by Benjamin Friedman<sup>23</sup>, that economic growth allows most people to see their circumstances improve and so fosters tolerance and fairness whereas economic stagnation leads to distrust and fear. As this is a study of political happiness, economic growth is considered a relevant factor.

<sup>22</sup> Brock Blomberg, Gregory D. Hess and Akila Weerapana *The Impact Of Voter Initiatives On Economic Activity* Wellesley College 2001

<sup>23</sup> B Friedman *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* Knopf, 1995

# Conclusion

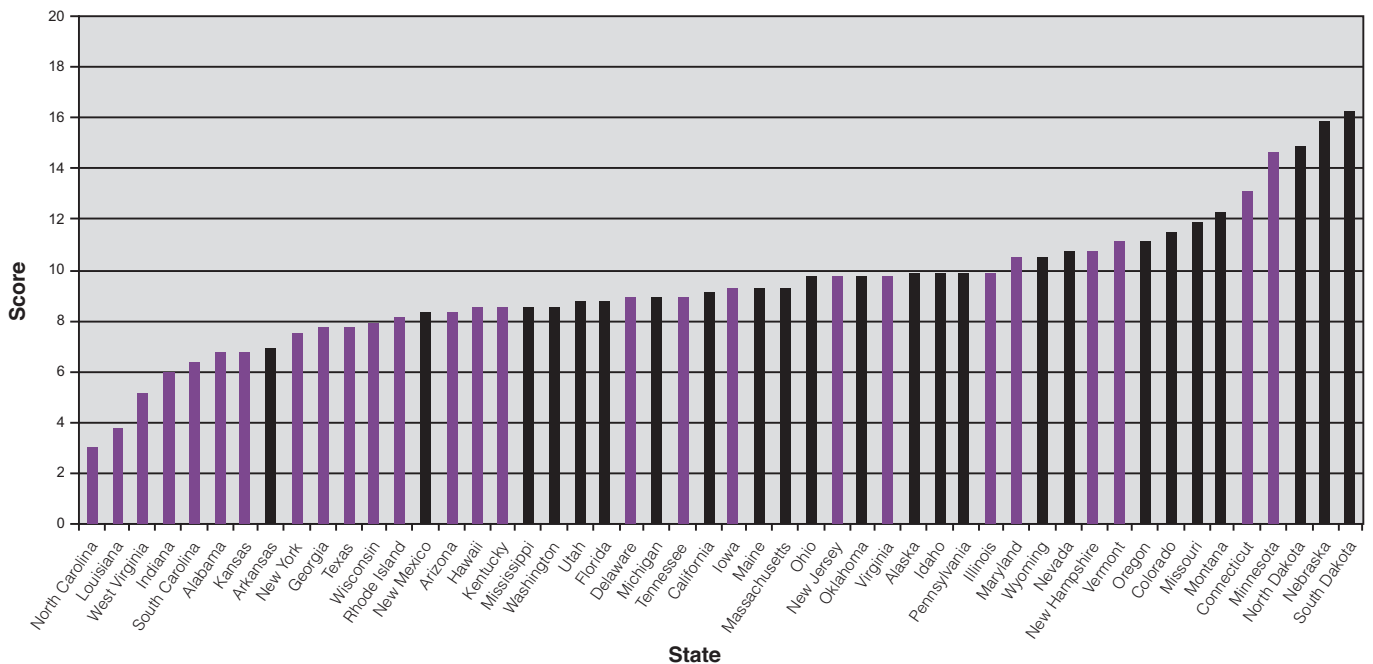
Combining the various factors in the happiness index to give each state a score out of 100 shows the positive impact that Citizens' Initiatives could have on political happiness. The average happiness score for Initiative states is 52.67, more than ten percentage points higher than the non-Initiative state average of 42.42.

The top three states according to the index are all Initiative states – South Dakota, which was the first state to introduce the system in 1898, Nebraska and North Dakota. In fact, seven of the top ten states use the Initiative, while only one of the bottom ten does. One-third of Initiative states are in the bottom half of the graph while two-thirds are in the top half.

What is striking is the consistency of the data across the five categories. In each case, Initiative states fare better than non-Initiative states. On attitudes towards satisfaction with life in general, the top five states were Initiative states and half of all Initiatives states (12) were in the top 16 places. People who can use Initiatives are also more likely to be trusting – 16 Initiative states are in the top half of the graph while just eight are in the bottom half.

Citizens' Initiatives would not be a panacea for our various political ills or persuade everyone to turn out to vote. The evidence suggests, however, that at a time when politicians are looking for new ways to engage the public in politics as well as to improve wellbeing, introducing Citizens' Initiatives could be an important part of the answer – having a positive impact not just on politics but on political happiness.

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83 Victoria Street,  
London  
SW1H 0HW