
The Unz Initiatives and the Dangers of Direct Democracy

May 15, 2003
Politics 101
Schildkraut

Friends of the Library
Excellence in Research Award Submission
September 28, 2003

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In the United States, citizen ballot initiatives are imagined to represent the purest kind of direct democracy. Citizens are concerned about an issue, craft their own measure or proposition, collect signatures needed to place it on the ballot, and let the voting public support or reject making the initiative into law. Yet the initiative process can often work against democratic ideals, in many significant ways. With the reality of individual interests, the influence of money and media, and the structure of the initiative system itself, citizen initiatives can have detrimental effects, particularly for minority groups.

One pertinent example of the ways in which the initiative system can be directed to press majority views upon minorities is found in four anti-bilingual education measures backed by multimillionaire Ron Unz. Unz, a software developer and former Republican candidate for California governor, began advocating against bilingual education in California with 1998's Proposition 227 (2000 Crawford: 106). The proposition aimed to dismantle the state's bilingual education programs, replacing them with "sheltered English immersion" programs that would only last one year (2000:112). Proposition 227 passed by a wide margin in and Unz went on to attempt almost identical initiatives in Arizona in 2000 and Massachusetts and Colorado in 2002. By examining the success of these initiatives in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, as well as the failure of the Unz initiative in Colorado, many key aspects of the initiative process are revealed, and it becomes clear that initiatives can easily oppose, rather than support, democratic ideals.

Ballot Initiatives and Influential Individuals

Many people view ballot initiatives as a political structure through which the “will of the people” can be expressed (2002 Ellis: 77). They are painted as “direct democracy” and perceived as a way to avoid cumbersome elements of the legislative system (2002:87). Although this view of ballot initiatives as direct democracy may be true in principle, it often falls apart in practice. In reality, interest groups or influential individuals are often the real force behind these initiatives. This fact can have dramatic effects on how or even whether the “will of the people” is heard.

In California, for example, there have been an increasing number of initiatives proposed by elected official or candidates, rather than “ordinary” citizens. In 1988 and 1990, elected officials or individuals seeking elected positions sponsored more than half of all the initiatives on the California ballot (2002:80). As a gubernatorial candidate in the 1994 Republican primary, Ron Unz fits this trend. His story provides an excellent example of how wealthy and influential individuals can use the initiative system to achieve their aims.

After funding and promoting Proposition 227 in California, Unz shifted his focus to dismantling the bilingual education programs of Arizona, Massachusetts, and Colorado. Each of the initiatives sponsored by local “English for the Children” groups contained virtually identical text.¹ Unz provided either direct funding or interest free loans to these groups, for the purpose of collecting signatures and promoting the legislation. The national “English for the Children” organization, which Unz chairs,

¹ The text and summaries of all four ballot initiatives sponsored by Ron Unz and “English for the Children” can be accessed at their website, <<http://www.onenation.org>>.

began in 1997 as an offshoot of Unz's "One Nation/One California."ⁱⁱ This method of creating and promoting initiatives is in conflict with the idea that initiatives in different states originate from the individual citizens of those states.

Furthermore, aside from the misconception that ballot initiatives are grassroots measures created by independent concerned citizens, the initiatives themselves are likely to oppose the democratic ideals. There are three main ways in which initiatives can be dangerous for democracy: the possibility of unchecked majority rule, the difficulty of amending or removing initiatives once they are voted into law, and the indirect ways in which initiatives can constrain the actions of legislatures and courts. These problems arise with all citizen initiatives that affect minority groups and are particularly evident in the Unz initiatives against bilingual education.

Dangers of Ballot Initiatives

First, ballot initiatives are dangerous to democracy because they allow majorities to impose their will on minorities. Ballot measures and initiatives bypass the representative legislatures where minority groups have gained influence and permit the majority to create policies detrimental to minority groups (1998 Tolbert and Hero: 213). The system of checks and balances structured into legislatures was designed to protect the rights of the minority, and the initiatives process is without such provisions (2002 Ellis: 127). Therefore, in states where there is evidence of a backlash against increasing minority populations and their representation in the legislature, there is a greater likelihood of ballot initiatives that seem to target those minority groups (1998 Tolbert and Hero: 213). Barbara Gamble (1997), in her study of the initiative process, examined 74

ⁱⁱ For more information about One Nation/One California and its proposition of "English for the Children," visit <<http://www.onenation.org>>.

civil rights related initiatives proposed from 1959-1993 and found that 78 percent of these initiatives resulted in outcomes that were detrimental to minorities (1997: 253-4). Gamble concluded that "citizens in the political majority have repeatedly used direct democracy to put the rights of political minorities to a popular vote" in areas such as school desegregation, gay rights, and English language laws (1997:261). Without the filtering influence and internal checks of the legislative system, in which minority interests may be more influential, majorities tend to use initiatives to damage minority civil rights.

Second, the initiative process is problematic because often the laws created via initiatives are very difficult to change. This is due to policies preventing legislative interference with citizen initiatives, the text of the initiatives themselves, and the reluctance of legislators to go against what appears to be public opinion. In California and Arizona, state law constrains legislative changes to initiatives. California requires the legislature to submit any amendments or repeals of initiatives to another vote of the people, and Arizona requires a three-fourths vote in the legislature to amend initiatives (2002 Ellis: 126). These types of restrictions, in combination with the reluctance of courts and legislatures to challenge the direct demands of voters, make it unlikely that citizen initiatives will be altered (2002:126). Furthermore, voters can also pass initiatives prohibiting new laws that might support minority civil rights. One such case, a 1992 measure passed in Colorado, prohibited state and local agencies from passing laws against sexual orientation discrimination (1997 Gamble: 260).

Also, the text of individual initiatives may include provisions making them difficult to change. The Unz initiatives provide a solid example of this possibility.

California's Proposition 227 cannot be amended without a two-thirds vote of each house of the legislature and the governor's signature (1999 "Text of Proposition 227").

Arizona's Proposition 203 is also subject to change only through the constitutional amendment process (1999 "Text of Proposition 203"). With restrictions both from states and from individual amendments, it is unlikely that such initiatives will be repealed or amended by legislatures.

Last, the third problematic aspect of initiatives is that their symbolic status as the "will of the people" can indirectly influence and constrain legislatures and courts. In her study of legislative responses to popular initiatives, Elizabeth Gerber (1996) found that initiatives provide voters with a way to indirectly influence policy by affecting the behavior of their elected representatives, and that at least with certain laws, the legislatures in initiatives states tend to more closely mirror the preferences of their median voters (1996: 2). Although this indirect influence might have positive results for the majority of voters, it could be problematic if that majority is in favor of laws that hurt minorities, or are otherwise unconstitutional. Moreover, when legislatures and courts review laws passed by citizen majorities, the chance of legislative or court changes to those initiatives is decreased by the unpopularity of questioning voter-approved laws (2002 Ellis: 126).

In the case of the Unz initiatives against bilingual education, all of the previously mentioned problems with initiatives are relevant concerns. As popular initiatives, these measures bypassed states legislative systems and their checks, minority representation, and other forces that might question their content. They also included specific language making them difficult to change and were passed in states where the

laws already make legislative amendments or repeals unlikely. Finally, due to popular support for the Unz initiatives, as evidenced by their passage, it seems unlikely that courts or legislatures would go against public opinion to amend or repeal these laws.

The issue of popular support is particularly significant when examining the profiles of the states where the initiatives both succeeded and failed. Each of the four states, California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Colorado, fit a profile of states likely to pass anti-minority legislation of this kind. The conditions under which such legislation is likely to arise provides further insight into how majorities can use the initiative process against minorities.

Common Precursors to the Unz Initiatives

The precursors to the anti-bilingual education initiatives of Ron Unz provide the critical backdrop against which his propositions and measures succeeded in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, and failed in Colorado. These early measures include any official-English legislation passed that confirms the primacy of English as the American language, as well as any anti-immigrant, or anti-illegal immigrant measures passed in states with high numbers of immigrants. The kinds of states that pass these types of initiatives are the same as those where Unz could and did successfully market anti-bilingual education propositions.

Twenty-six states have passed official-English laws, twenty-one of which were approved after 1980 (1997 Schildkraut: 445). The main profile of states that tend to pass official-English legislation includes those states with large foreign-born populations and a history of using the initiative process. Specifically, those states allowing direct initiatives that also have a high proportion of immigrants “see pushes for language laws”

(1997:446). In 2000, only twenty-three of the fifty states had a foreign-born population of more than five percent. California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Colorado all have foreign-born populations greater than that of most states, with Colorado's 9.8 percent being the smallest, and California's 25.9 percent the largest (2001 United States). Each of these states also allows for ballot initiatives. In contrast, states with high foreign-born populations but *without* the initiative process are unlikely to see official-English laws (1997 Schildkraut: 446).

The fact that only states with both large foreign-born populations and the initiative process are likely to adopt official-English laws indicates that the legislatures may provide a check on the will of native-born majorities. This may be a result of minority representation in legislative bodies, and it may also result from the desire of elected government officials – even those who might otherwise support anti-minority legislation – to avoid alienating important minority voting blocs (1997:446). For example, in the case of official-English laws, it may be that government officials are reluctant to irritate Hispanic voters (1995 Tatalovich: 169).

Furthermore, along with the connection between foreign-born populations, initiatives, and the passage of official-English laws, there is also a link between these laws and the presence of other minority populations. In one study, the likelihood of states passing official-English legislation via initiatives was correlated with the presence of high Hispanic/Latino populations in those states (2001 Gibbs and Bankhead: 131). Three of the states in which the Unz initiatives appeared on ballots have Hispanic populations greater than the national average of 12.5 percent. On the 2000 census, California, Arizona, and Colorado were 32 percent, 25 percent, and 17 percent Hispanic,

respectively (2002 United States).ⁱⁱⁱ Generally, the presence of both large Hispanic populations and the initiative process results in official-English initiatives that precede anti-bilingual education measures such as the Unz initiatives. Looking at the relationship between the use of initiatives for this type of legislation and the presence of both foreign-born and Hispanic populations, there is clearly a connection between these circumstances and the passages of official-English laws and other anti-minority legislation.

California is a particularly strong example of this connection. In 1994, the state passed Proposition 187, restricting the resources available to illegal immigrants. After examining the racial/ethnic pattern of voting for and against California's Proposition 187, one study hypothesized that measures similar to Proposition 187, or related issues of language and ethnicity, would diffuse to states that fit California's profile of politically separate racial and ethnic groups and high usage of the initiative process – states such as Arizona, Colorado, Florida and Texas (1998 Tolbert and Hero: 225). In fact, after Proposition 227 passed in California, Unz did bring the anti-bilingual education proposition to Arizona, and then to Colorado as well.^{iv} Clearly, the initiative process provides a particular avenue for the white majorities in these states to create language and immigrant policies opposed by and detrimental to local minority populations.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the 2000 census, the state of Massachusetts had a Hispanic population of 6.8 percent, which is below the national average. In addition, there has been debate over the provisions and effects of Massachusetts' official-English law, as well as attempts at further official-English legislation in 1998, 1999, and 2000. For more information see "Language Legislation Archives" at <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics/people/grads/macswan/leg-arc.htm>.

^{iv} There are specific reasons why Unz did not propose similar initiatives in Florida or Texas. In an interview, Unz told reporters that he did not attempt such legislation in Texas because that state does not have the same initiative process as Massachusetts and that Florida does not have bilingual education programs (Forman).

Finally, in addition to their demographics and initiative histories, California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Colorado serve to further demonstrate the shortcomings of the initiative process. The Unz initiatives passed in these four states provide clear examples of how poll data and court decisions reveal the flaws in a supposedly democratic initiative system. Furthermore, a comparison of Massachusetts and Colorado's simultaneous and opposite election results over the Unz initiatives shows firmly that citizen initiatives place too much power in the hands of majorities.

Initiatives and the Polls

In the question of direct democracy and anti-minority initiatives, the poll system represents both a reflection of and a way to influence public opinion. National polls in the 1990s showed that Americans increasingly viewed newer immigrants of color as a tax burden and possible threat to American culture (2001 Gibbs and Bankhead: 131). A national Gallup poll in 1993 showed that 55% of Americans felt that the "increasing diversity that immigrants bring to this country...mostly threaten[d] American culture."^y That sentiment seemed to be reflected by the official-English and anti-illegal immigrant legislation that initiative states voted into law. However, in the case of Unz initiatives, poll data showed and perhaps caused a lot more than a simple reflection of the majority's opinions about immigrants.

In all four states in question, the anti-bilingual education measures put forth by Unz and his supporters were greeted by enthusiastic poll results. In California, these polls indicated not only broad support among white voters, but also support among Latino voters, a fact that was framed as reflecting Latinos negative attitudes about bilingual education. A 1997 LA Times poll on Proposition 227 found that 84 percent of

^y This poll can be accessed at Polling the Nations, <<http://poll.orspub.com/>>.

Latinos favored the measure, an even greater margin than that of the population as a whole (2000 Crawford: 107).^{vi} This data contributed to the idea that the very people using the bilingual education program wanted it dismantled, and meshed well with Unz's image of Proposition 227 – an image that drew on the 1996 protest by Latino parents against Los Angeles's Ninth Street Elementary.^{vii} However, despite the pre-election polls showing Latino support for Proposition 227, exit polls from the election itself show a very different voting pattern.

At the end of the election, Proposition 227 had indeed passed, by a margin of 61 to 39 percent. Latino voters, however, weighed in at 63 percent *against* its passage, a dramatic difference from 84 percent in favor (2000:107). There are several possible reasons for the discord between these two sets of data. First, the polls did not adequately sample a cross section of low-income Latinos or those with limited English skills. The poll results therefore reflected the feelings of upwardly mobile Latinos who tended to be less sure of the value of bilingual education (2001 Gibbs and Bankhead: 134).

Second, the types of questions asked on the polls greatly affected the responses of Latino voters and voters in general. This fact is significant in that poll questions and the content of initiatives are often similar. For example, the summary of Proposition 227 frames the measure as “requir[ing] all public school instruction be conducted in English” and a Los Angeles Times poll asked for responses to a measure that “would require all public school instruction to be conducted in English and for students not fluent in English

^{vi} Eighty-percent of all respondents favored the measure in this poll (2000 Crawford: 107).

^{vii} There is debate over whether all the members of the protest participated freely in what was really a strike against the school (2000 Crawford: 106).

to be placed in a short-term English immersion program” (1997 “Title and Summary”).^{viii}

That poll showed that 80 percent of respondents were in favor of such a measure.

To illustrate how the wording of poll questions can dramatically affect their outcomes, a study conducted by Stephen D. Krashen (2001) asked voters one of two questions about bilingual education. The first followed the language of Proposition 227 and used wording identical to the LA Times poll, essentially framing the question as “do you want children to get English instruction” and attempting to sample a variety of voters (2001:124). Responses to Krashen’s poll showed that 57 percent of voters supported this framing of Proposition 227.

In contrast, when the question included the specific details of the measure, such as that the initiative would “limit special help in English to one year,” “dismantle many current programs,” “hold teachers financially responsible if they violate this policy” and give schools only “sixty days to conform,” Krashen found that support for the measure fell from 57 percent to only 15 percent (2001: 124). Since the polls conducted by the LA Times, as well as the actual text of the proposition were framed in the manner of the first question, it is not surprising that the majority of voters choose to support Proposition 227. This example serves to illustrate the importance of how initiatives are written and presented to the voting population, and the real danger of misleading the public into an incomplete understanding of a given measure’s provisions. In an attempt to avoid misleading voters, there are laws and restrictions regarding the wording and titling of ballot initiatives. The Unz initiatives, interestingly, have had consistent difficulties with such restrictions.

^{viii} This poll can be accessed at Polling the Nations, <<http://poll.orspub.com/>>.

The Courts and Initiative Rhetoric

The original versions of both Arizona's Proposition 203 and Colorado's Measure 31 were found to be misleading by those state Supreme Courts and were altered prior to their inclusion in the ballot. In Arizona, the state Supreme Court found that the voter's pamphlet analysis presented by Proposition 203 "misstated how many children were currently entitled to bilingual education" and the State Elections Director had to delete the first paragraph of analysis to avoid misleading voters (2000 "Prop 203 Advocates Fail"). In Colorado, the ballot title of Measure 31 was rejected by the Court because it had an unclear title and summary that contained a "prohibited catch phrase" which could mislead voters. The measure stated that public schools should teach English "as rapidly and effectively as possible" and the Court stated that this phrase worked in favor of the proposal without adding to voter understanding of the measure's content and effects (2000 *Garcia v. Chavez*). That phrase, "as rapidly and effectively as possible," while removed from the title and summary in Colorado, does appear in the full text of all four of the Unz initiatives against bilingual education. In addition, a similar phrase declaring that schools should teach English "as quickly as possible" was left in the descriptive title of Arizona's proposition (2000 "Official Arizona").

The issue of wording and how it influences voters is a major concern around ballot initiatives. Their frequently "populist" wording often paints the issue as more straightforward than it is, and draws voter attention away from the actual provisions and effects of a given initiative. In their particular framing of complex issues, initiatives reflect the special interests who write them more than the voters who vote for them. The importance of ballot titles, for example, indicates that initiative elections are very much

like opinion polls (2001 Ellis: 202). They may appear to reflect public opinion, but in reality the way the question is asked dramatically effects both poll and election outcomes. As Krashen showed, including the specific provisions of Unz's anti-bilingual education measures caused a severe drop in voter support for those initiatives. The tendency of voters to read only ballot titles and summaries makes the simple and often misleading content of those crucial areas far too influential over election results. Of course, the majority of voters may also be misled by other forces, such as the influence of money, media, and campaign strategies.

Colorado and Massachusetts: Two Kinds of Majority Rule

A comparison of the elections and outcomes in Massachusetts and Colorado shows the problematic power initiatives give to majorities and the influence of money and media on those voters. Both states had an Unz initiative on the ballot in November of 2002, and both had a high percentage of foreign-born residents, along with some official-English legislation and a history of using the initiative process. However, despite early poll indications that voters in both states would pass the Unz initiatives, the state of Colorado failed to do so. While Massachusetts voters passed their initiative, Question 2, by a wide margin of 68 percent, only 44 percent of voters in Colorado supported their Measure 31 on Election Day (2003 Lyman; 2002 "State Races"). These opposite responses to essentially identical ballot measures are best explained by the particular use of money and media in Colorado. In the end, both states serve to illustrate how initiatives give too much power to majorities.

Massachusetts

In August of 2001, Unz announced plans to dismantle Massachusetts's bilingual education program (2002 Vaishnav). The initiative, Question 2, was officially proposed by Massachusetts "English for the Children," to whom Unz gave the \$265,000 needed to collect the signatures that would put it on the 2002 ballot. Early polls showed 71 percent of voters in favor of the measure (2002 Price). Question 2 was opposed by teacher's unions and left-wing Latino activists, who spent four times as much as supporters in their attempt to defeat Question 2 (2003 Lyman). The teacher's unions specifically campaigned against the provision of Question 2 that would permit parents or guardians to sue their child's school in order to enforce the anti-bilingual education law. The efforts of the opposition were in vain, and the initiative passed by 68 percent (2003 Lyman).

Interestingly, while the majority in Massachusetts supported this Unz initiative, Latino voters in Massachusetts did not. Exit polls from the University of Massachusetts showed that 92 percent of Latino voters voted against the measure (2002 Mitchell, "Latino Voters"). Since Latinos form less than seven percent of Massachusetts's population, their opposition was not significant enough to defeat the initiative. The primarily white, English-speaking voters of Massachusetts voted against bilingual education and there are two major factors that contributed to this outcome.

First, the language of the ballot summary and title frame the measure as simply arguing to, as one proponent described it, "teach the kids English" (2003 Lyman). The official ballot summary states that the measure will "require that, with limited exceptions, all public school children must be taught English by being taught all subjects in English and being placed in English language classrooms" and makes no mention of the fact that

this would cause the destruction of any and all bilingual education programs (2002 “Official Massachusetts”). However, even if the Massachusetts campaign against Question 2 had focused more on bilingual education, it may not have helped. As the media campaign in Colorado proved, it may take more than the facts to turn the majority in favor of a minority program.

Colorado

The campaign for Colorado’s Unz initiative, Measure 31, also began in 2001. In February of 2002, only eight months before the November election, a Rocky Mountain News/News 4 poll showed that 68 percent of Colorado voters were in favor of Measure 31 (2002 Mitchell, “Colorado hands”). In addition, Colorado’s high Hispanic population of 17 percent and a relatively recent official-English bill passed in 1988 meant that the state fit into the demographic and historical trend set by California and Arizona. Despite these trends and the strong poll numbers, Measure 31 failed, and that failure was the result of two main factors. First, Colorado’s large contingent of Hispanic voters made a strong stand against the measure, with early polls showing 85 percent of Hispanic households not in favor (2002 Mitchell, “Latino voters”). Second, the pro-bilingual education group, English Plus, launched an extensive and distinctly different media campaign that turned other voters away from Unz’s initiative.

In a post-election comparison of votes by county against the 2000 census records of Latino voters in those counties, it was clear that Latinos helped to defeat Measure 31. In counties across the state, neighborhoods with higher numbers of Hispanic residents almost always meant more votes against the initiative. Furthermore, in the three Denver neighborhoods with the most Hispanic voters, Measure 31 was

rejected by a 2-to-1 margin (2002 Mitchell, "Latinos voters"). The Hispanic residents' strong position against the measure contributed to the measure's defeat in a way that the same stance of Massachusetts's small Hispanic population did not. Still, Latinos are only 17 percent of Colorado's population, so a major segment of Colorado's mostly white voters also had to vote against the measure. They were convinced to do so by English Plus and their massive, and anti-Hispanic, media campaign.

That campaign was created by political consultants Welchert & Britz and reflected neither the purported values of bilingual education, nor any positive qualities of an initiative system. First, the campaign was almost completely funded by a single individual, multimillionaire Pat Stryker. Stryker's daughter participated in a bilingual education program and Stryker donated three million dollars to English Plus in order to see that program continue (2002 Mitchell "Colorado hands"). Welchert & Britz used the funds to create a series of television ads for "No on 31."

Their ad strategy was based on poll data that showed "no sensitivity to the Latino culture in Colorado" and that the public did not understand bilingual education (2002 Mitchell "Colorado hands"). Therefore, the consultants pursued a strategy using precisely the sort of nativist language that Unz and "English for the Children" avoided. The ads were in response to a hunch that the white majority in Colorado would be opposed to having non-English speaking Hispanic students placed in the same classes as their children. A Colorado news article explained the television ads as "dark" depictions of sad-looking children in which an announcer described how the presence of children who speak little English, mostly Hispanic students, would have a negative effect on the education of "your children," who the reporter assumed to be the mostly white families of

Colorado (2002 Mitchell "Colorado hands"). In effect, the ads used simplistic and anti-Hispanic messages to fight *for* the continuance of bilingual education, and they successfully manipulated voters into backing away from Unz's initiative.

Although this result was a victory against the possible destruction of bilingual education, the need for such manipulative tactics reveals that the election surrounding Measure 31 was not at all about the complexity of the bilingual education issue. In the same way that voters in Massachusetts voted for Question 2 as a white majority unconcerned with the position of minority groups or the details of the initiative, the voters of Colorado did exactly the same, looking to protect their own interests and prevent Hispanic students from joining their classrooms. Had Colorado voters opposed the measure for its content, it would not have required a three million dollar advertising campaign to change poll numbers from 68 to 44 percent. Clearly, the initiative system does not result in voter understanding of critical issues. Both the success of the Unz initiatives in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, as well as the defeat of the initiative in Colorado, reveal the serious flaws of ballot initiatives.

In the end, close examination of the initiative system in the United States shows that citizen initiatives are an ineffective and often undemocratic way of creating legislation. Far from a simple action in which concerned citizens lobby for an issue, the initiative system is used to promote individual interests, national campaigns, and the unchecked will of poorly informed and often prejudiced majorities. Initiative legislation frequently attacks minority groups, and voters are all too easily manipulated by simplistic, populist language and media tactics.

The four Unz initiatives against bilingual education are particularly strong examples of how such dangerous initiatives are enacted and how unlikely they are to change. Following on the heels of official-English laws and bypassing legislatures unlikely to pass such measures, the initiative process provided an avenue for majority voters to abolish an institution that primarily serves minorities. By framing the question of bilingual education as a simple choice between teaching or not teaching English, and using wording so populist it was thrown out by courts, Ron Unz and "English for the Children" successfully forwarded a particular agenda backed by a white majority. The initiative system fundamentally supports the will of that majority and is a dangerous and undemocratic way of creating American laws.

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