

The Vote on Proposition 17 – Post-Election Poll in 1974 Says 60 Percent Intended to Save the Stanislaus River

The 1974 initiative measure, Proposition 17, was defeated in the November election by a margin of 52-48 percent. However, the hugely well-funded campaign against the measure was able to create great confusion over what a “yes” vote (to save the Stanislaus) meant. As a result, there were many people who voted one way but intended the other outcome.

A post-election poll by Friends of the River showed a very different intended outcome – 60 percent of voters favored saving the river from flooding, as in the objective of Proposition 17.

Here is author Tim Palmer’s 1989 story about that polling:

The week after the election, FOR contracted the widely respected polling firm of Corey, Canapary and Galanis to survey voters. Just how confused was the public anyway? The conclusion: "On election day, November 5, 1974, the majority of voters in California intended to vote against construction of the New Melones Dam and Reservoir on the Stanislaus River."

...The Corey, Canapary and Galanis report continues, "As of the survey period more voters opposed the dam than favored it . . . Confusion caused by the wording of the ballot proposition itself and by the advertising resulted in the defeat of the wild and scenic river initiative."

The survey showed that confusion was pervasive, affecting people on both sides. Of those voting yes (for the wild river and against the dam), 24 percent meant to vote no. Of those voting no (against the wild river and for the dam), fully 46 percent meant to vote yes. Confusing indeed. Those figures suggest the whole election was a farce. The net result—about 60 percent of the people who voted intended to vote for the wild river and against the dam. This was the vote that guaranteed construction [NOTE – really just the filling] of New Melones.

Page 111, Stanislaus – Struggle for River by Tim Palmer, 1981

<https://www.stanislausriver.org/document/stanislaus-struggle-for-a-river/>

More on Proposition 17 is on the Stanislaus River archive:

<https://www.stanislausriver.org/explore/?sort=uploaded&keywords=48>

Larry Orman - April 18, 2024