

An Overview of the Ballot Measure

The ballot measure calls for withdrawing all U.S. troops and bases from Iraq no later than November 2009; bringing the money home and addressing the damage of the war; and letting the Iraqi people vote on ending the occupation. The overriding purpose is to build the political power necessary to set an enforceable deadline to end the Iraq War, principally through referendums on the war in both the United States and Iraq. Each of the three ballot measure questions already receives majority support in the United States, and thus the text as a whole likely will be supported, both with signatures and at the polls. The three questions are the essential minimum needed to build the political power to end the war.

Withdraw all U.S. troops and bases within one year

Shall the Congress and President of the United States end the U.S. occupation of Iraq and immediately begin the safe and orderly withdrawal of all U.S. troops and military bases from Iraq, to be completed no later than November 4, 2009?

The ballot measure sets a one-year deadline for withdrawal from the time that people vote on the measures on November 4, 2008. Although we all want withdrawal to happen more quickly, withdrawal within one year is what 60 percent of Americans (and more) want. This is what is most feasible politically, that is, the most likely to be approved by voters. The ballot measure will create the political support needed to end the occupation and to bring the troops home at the earliest possible realistic date.

Why not immediate withdrawal or a shorter deadline? Only about one-third of Americans support immediate withdrawal, which means such a measure would fail. An earlier deadline would be strongly opposed by the military and by the Democratic presidential nominee, and thus such a measure would have a good chance of losing.

Even if a state or city had a more progressive electorate that would support a shorter timeline, the power of individual ballot measures will be magnified by being part of a national strategy that uses the same text. This is what the nuclear freeze did in 1982, in putting measures on the ballot in ten states and fifty-six cities and counties.

Is November 2009 too short a deadline, given that a new administration and Congress will not take office until late January 2009? Although most antiwar groups have given up on trying to convince Congress to support withdrawal in 2008, withdrawal does not have to begin only after a new Congress and a Democratic president take office. Whatever hope there is for congressional approval of withdrawal before 2009 probably rests on this strategy. In the wake of a mandate from victories for the ballot measures in November 2008, Congress can mandate that withdrawal begin immediately, before President Bush is out of office. If widespread enough, ballot measures may force some Republican members of Congress to support withdrawal, possibly enough to override a presidential veto.

Can withdrawal happen sooner than November 2009? There is nothing in the ballot measure to prevent withdrawal from happening sooner--the suggested text reads "no later than November 4, 2009." An earlier withdrawal will depend on the political organization and will of Americans and Iraqis and on the support of the international community. The power generated by the circulation of the ballot measures, specifically the threat of defeat in the November elections for congressional candidates that oppose it, can be used to stiffen the spine of the

Democrats to put withdrawal timelines to a vote and, failing that, to vote on support for an Iraqi referendum, the functional equivalent of a withdrawal timeline. In addition, a referendum in Iraq could mean that U.S. troops would begin to come home earlier: under the UN mandate, which is in effect until December 31, 2008, the Iraqi government can request that occupation forces leave at any time, a request the United States is required by international law to honor. Averaging Iraqi positions shown in polls (as of September) on when all U.S. troops should be withdrawn, the median was nine to ten months.

But most importantly, troop withdrawal will happen sooner if the anti-war movement expresses the democratic will of Americans and Iraqis to more assertively demand an end to the war. The ballot measures and a referendum in Iraq will give us the basis to act for the majority in carrying out demonstrations and additional lobbying to finally force Congress and the president to bring the war to an end.

Bring the money home and address the costs of the war

Shall the taxpayers' money being spent on the war in Iraq be used instead to care for our veterans, help reconstruct Iraq, help alleviate budgets cuts in many states, and provide funding for unmet needs here at home?

Polling and focus groups last summer in connection with Iraq Summer found that the following message about the war resonated most with voters: Congress is wasting taxpayers' money on a religious civil war that has no end in sight. This money should be spent at home. Addressing the costs of the war is essential for gaining support for the ballot measures and for expanding the coalition supporting the campaign. It is also vital for getting the measures on the ballot in the first place, since almost all the potential statewide measures will have to be put on the ballot by state legislatures. "Localizing" this issue by addressing how war funding can be brought home to meet unmet needs, including potentially helping cover state budget shortfalls, will be essential to getting support in state legislatures. It also will enable supporters of the ballot measure to ally with coalitions opposing budget cuts by pointing out that the money spent on the war could instead have gone to state and local governments or to federal aid to cash-strapped state governments, making budget cuts unnecessary.

Why this particular language on this issue? The language addresses two issues: (1) the damage caused by war, by caring for veterans and helping reconstruct Iraq, and (2) meeting unmet needs at home. "Helping reconstruct Iraq" means that other nations can assist in reconstruction, although the United States bears overwhelming responsibility for that. The phrase "unmet needs" is kept intentionally vague so that voters can make their own interpretation of what they think those are.

Let the Iraqi people vote on whether the occupation should end

Shall the U.S. government, in order to help end the Iraq War sooner and enable a safer withdrawal of U.S. troops, allow Iraqis to vote in a national referendum on whether U.S. troops and military bases should be withdrawn?

How would an election work? A referendum on whether and for how long the U.S. occupation should continue would have to be put on the ballot by a majority vote of the Iraqi

parliament, and then signed by the prime minister. Although the Iraqi government would decide how the ballot would be worded, one possibility is to ask a series of questions that would get more precisely at what individuals wanted; for example, asking whether the occupation should continue until Iraqi forces can take over, be ended in two years, in one year, in six months, or immediately. These questions are similar to those asked in polls. Because at least two-thirds of Iraqis want U.S. troops to leave within a year, it's fairly certain that Iraqis would say yes to ending the occupation. The median position (which currently is that U.S. troops should leave within nine to ten months) could then become the basis for a withdrawal timeline that would be negotiated between the Iraqi and American governments.

Is an election even possible, given the violence in Iraq and the expected opposition of the Maliki and Bush administrations? An election is possible, especially if the issue could be added to the elections to select provincial governments, which are scheduled to be held before October 1, 2008. Because the great majority of Iraqis have made up their minds about the occupation, little or no campaigning would be required during an election. And because the great majority opposes the occupation, it would not be in the interest of any major Iraqi group for the election to be disrupted by violence.

A vote on the occupation will be strenuously resisted by the Maliki government and the Bush administration. The Maliki government, under pressure from the United States, will likely veto a parliamentary bill mandating that a referendum be held. Because the occupation is justified by the United States bringing democracy to Iraq, however, opposition to a referendum will place the Bush administration and the supporters of its Iraq policies in a difficult position. Getting the referendum onto the ballot in Iraq will be a major, but not impossible, political struggle that will require support from the Iraqi people and parliament, from the ballot measure campaign, from Congress, and from the international community, all working together for a democratic, nonviolent, international end to the occupation. People-to-people contact and the inclusion of the referendum language in the ballot measure will encourage Iraqis to press for a referendum and make it more likely that the idea will get the attention and support of the U.S. Congress and the international community. A drive for a referendum in Iraq can in turn encourage the ballot measure efforts here.

Why would Iraqis want to hold an election? A majority of members of the Iraqi parliament have expressed their support for withdrawal three times in the last two years, asking the government to set a withdrawal timeline or for the parliament to have a binding say, as is constitutionally required, in whether the UN mandate for the occupation should continue. All three times the parliament has been unconstitutionally ignored by the Maliki government, the Bush administration, and, most recently, by the United Nations. Now, Bush and Maliki are negotiating an agreement for a permanent occupation.

This leaves the majority of Iraqis and the majority of members of parliament who want an end to the occupation with four alternatives. First, the parliament can bring down the Maliki government and form a new government that would push for withdrawal. It hasn't happened yet, and any feasible alternative government would be an unstable coalition riven by major differences on other issues. Second, and most likely, attacks on U.S. troops will increase because democratic alternatives are closed. Third, Iraqis, like Americans, can wait for the U.S. Congress to withdraw U.S. troops or for a new president and Congress to do so starting in 2009, maybe. Fourth, the Iraqi people can push to hold a referendum on the occupation as the only democratic alternative available. The constitution of Iraq allows for referendums on other issues. The turn to the referendum (initiatives) is what we do in the United States when our government is not

responsive to our desires on important issues. If the parliament were to do this on its own, however, it would be quashed by the Maliki government and the Bush administration, just as support for withdrawal and a say in whether the occupation should continue has been. In short, without support from the United States, and from the international community, there is no feasible means for the three-quarters of Iraqis who want the occupation to end in a year or less to have a democratic say on that issue. There is also a moral imperative: those who have suffered the most from the occupation should have a say in whether it should continue.

Under the United Nations mandate, which is the legal basis for the U.S. occupation, the Iraqis can ask occupation troops to withdraw at any time until the mandate ends December 30, 2008. Realistically, though, the Iraqi government has not, and will not, make such a request in the absence of such a referendum. Passage of a referendum would clear the way for the Iraqi government to request that U.S. forces be withdrawn.

How can we be sure that such a ballot question will be supported in this country? At first glance, a referendum in Iraq might seem an unfamiliar concept that would reduce support for the ballot measure. One objection might be, Why give Iraqis a say over what happens to the war and to U.S. troops? Actually, though, its inclusion likely will increase support for the ballot measure because of the results of a little noticed poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) shortly after the November 2006 election. In that poll, two-thirds of Republicans said they would support the withdrawal of U.S. troops within one year if the Iraqi people requested it and three-quarters would support it if the Iraqi government made such a request (support for withdrawal also increases by more than 20 percent among both Democrats and independents). In other words, **Republicans switch from two-thirds support for the war to two-thirds support for withdrawal**--the only measure that sees such a shift.

If there is strong resistance from a local government or a state legislature to put a measure on the ballot that contains the Iraq referendum clause, then it would be OK to drop it in the interest of at least getting the withdrawal timeline on the ballot. Another possibility is to place two measures on the ballot, one with the first two questions and the second with the last one, on the referendum in Iraq. It would be better if at least a strong case was made first for including it, however. The more familiarity there is with a referendum in Iraq and with its positive effects, both in Iraq and in the United States, the more support it will receive.

Why is this provision essential to the November election? Primarily because it is an important way to defeat John McCain as well as many pro-war Republicans. McCain will make continuing the war a, maybe *the*, central plank in his campaign. If we support a withdrawal deadline alone, and not the referendum, McCain can accuse the peace movement and Democrats of "cutting and running," of abandoning Iraq to greater violence. A Pew Political Survey (July 2007) found the following divisions among the public about withdrawal: 54 percent favored withdrawal; 19 percent opposed withdrawal, but believed the war was going poorly; 27 opposed withdrawal and believed the war was going well. As a result, Democrats equivocate about withdrawal. They wouldn't if the 19 percent who oppose withdrawal but believe the war is going poorly could be won over to the withdrawal position. What stands in their way, however, is the belief that the chance of a full-scale civil war, and the chance that al Qaeda will establish terrorist bases, will increase if the United States leaves. The referendum undercuts those rationales for staying. Supporting the Iraq referendum insulates Democrats from charges that the United States will be abandoning Iraq to greater violence if it withdraws, making it more likely that McCain will be defeated. It is for this reason, as well as the support that the referendum receives across

the political spectrum, that referendum language should be included in ballot measures wherever possible.

Want about Congressional legislation? If Congress is not going to consider binding withdrawal timelines this year, as seems likely, then a vote supporting a referendum in Iraq is the next best thing. Congressional support for a national referendum in Iraq on the occupation may be the closest Congress can get this year to a binding withdrawal timeline, because such a referendum would clear the way for passage of such a timeline by Congress before the end of 2008. Congressional legislation could support Iraq in holding such a referendum or mandate that it be done as a requirement for receiving government or reconstruction aid. Adding a vote on the occupation to the provincial government elections that are already scheduled to take place in Iraq before October 1 is the most logical way to do this. Because of the PIPA poll results and the ballot measure efforts here, such legislation will get some Republican support, both inside and outside Congress, in a way that withdrawal timelines have not so far. Such a measure does not interfere with the president's or the generals' conduct of the war--the principal reasons for opposing binding withdrawal timelines. Supporting a referendum in Iraq would give Republican members of Congress and candidates a way out of, an alternative to, either supporting the withdrawal of U.S. troops--which is opposed by their base--or of being defeated at the polls. It will take a referendum in Iraq to convince both the Iraqi government to make such a request and for Republicans to believe that this is the desire of the Iraqi people.

What if Iraqi voters set a different deadline from the U.S. ballot measures? Neither the referendum in Iraq nor the ballot measures here are acts of legislation; the actual withdrawal date will have to be negotiated. If Iraqis set a deadline before the one in the ballot measures, that is of course their right and it should be honored. If they set a date after the ballot measure deadline, Congress is under no obligation to honor it over the date that voters here have chosen, and can choose to abide by the November 2009 deadline specified in the ballot measure.

If the referendum in Iraq were to occur before November 2008, the presence of this clause on the ballot in the United States would mean that the ballot measure campaign here was one factor in making such a referendum possible and it would be a warning to Congress and the president to take the results of the referendum seriously. It also would greatly increase support for the ballot measures here. If the referendum had not yet happened, passage of the ballot measures would be a powerful force to make it happen.

What will be the effects of a referendum? Because the United States will have been voted out of Iraq, not driven out by violence (thus giving terrorists a victory), Democrats who support withdrawal cannot be accused of "cutting and running" or of abandoning Iraq to greater violence. More than that, the creation of a democratic alternative to violence will enhance the security of the United States. The passage of ballot measures here and of a referendum in Iraq, if those results are honored by the U.S. government, will do more than any other measure to reduce recruitment for al Qaeda and to protect the American people from the threat of terrorism. We can claim a partial victory for democracy in Iraq and withdraw with (some) honor.

And an Iraqi referendum on the occupation will be a chance for Americans, and the world, to hear the voices and the aspirations of the Iraqi people and to hear about their suffering. It will be the first time in which both the people of the occupied country and those of the occupier have voted to end an occupation. By their vote in a referendum the Iraqi people will be asserting, democratically and nonviolently, that they are taking responsibility for their own country. In doing so, they will open up greater possibilities for reconciliation within Iraq and for

regional governments and the international community to ally with them in securing and stabilizing the country, in advancing reconciliation and reconstruction.