

Ballot Measure 56 deserves to pass

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We have long believed that elections should be decided by the people who vote, not the people who throw their ballots in the trash. For that reason, we urge voters to support Measure 56.

The measure, a constitutional amendment referred by the 2007 Legislature, will expand the number of elections at which the so-called "double majority" does not apply. If Measure 56 passes, the double-majority requirement will not apply during May and November elections. Existing law, meanwhile, waives the requirement only during November elections held in even-numbered years.

Support for the double majority comes from those who dislike tax hikes more than they like core democratic principles. The requirement applies to property-tax measures like local option levies and bond issues, which must clear two hurdles in order to pass. First, a majority of those who cast ballots must support them. Second, a majority of registered voters must cast ballots. Thus, a measure could fail despite overwhelming support at the polls.

Funding measures, in fact, do fail with alarming regularity for just this reason. A levy that would have paid for new paramedic-firefighters failed in La Pine last year despite the support of 75 percent of actual voters. During the very same election, a measure to support Deschutes County's 911 service district failed despite the support of 67 percent of voters. And just a year earlier, a pair of permanent-funding districts for the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office failed even though most people who cast ballots supported them.

Many casualties of the double-majority requirement do pass eventually, often by crowding onto the ballot during a simple-majority election. But rationing democracy in this fashion is both offensive and, it seems to us, harmful even to those who support the double majority. It is offensive because it effectively counts nonvotes as "no" votes in most elections, thereby placing important funding measures in the hands of the apathetic and lazy. And it's harmful even to its supporters because it forces them to make a choice they shouldn't have to make.

How's that? The double-majority requirement encourages tax opponents to hold onto their ballots and monitor voter turnout. As long as turnout remains below 50 percent, they have an incentive not to vote. By doing so, though, they sacrifice their opportunity to vote in other races on the same ballot. You could say that serves them right, we suppose. But the state constitution shouldn't put anyone in such a position.

For these reasons, voters ought to change the Constitution in November by supporting Measure 56. True, the measure doesn't ditch the double majority entirely. But it does scale back the limitation significantly, and that's certainly worth doing.

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