

Remove double-majority rule for fairness

Current provision gives voice to folks who don't vote

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Do you research property-tax measures carefully before marking your ballot? That's great — but in most Oregon elections, your efforts can be overridden by someone who doesn't bother to vote.

Measure 56 would restore the power of your ballot. It would relax the unfair provision that requires a double majority to approve a property-tax measure — a majority vote plus a majority turnout.

Current law grants only one exception to this double-majority rule: in general elections in November of even-numbered years. That's why so many local tax measures are on the Nov. 4 ballot, competing with one another.

Measure 56 would remove the double-majority requirement from the May elections each year and the November election in odd-numbered years.

That makes sense, as May and November elections are ones with higher turnout.

The double-majority rule may not be fair, but it is working as exactly as its proponents intended. Since it took effect in the late 1990s, a number of money requests have won the popular vote yet failed to pass because the turnout fell below 50 percent.

That happened to a Salem-Keizer Transit levy in 2006, prompting a round of service cuts. Low turnout also killed a Stayton library measure in November 2001.

Back when Oregon held eight elections per year, double-majority supporters might have had a point. It was easier for government districts to pass tax measures by putting them on the ballot at obscure election dates.

But times have changed. Elections take place four times per year, and Oregonians vote by mail. Tax-measure ballots arrive at voters' residences in envelopes clearly marked "Contains Vote On Proposed Tax Increase." To make one's voice heard, all one needs to do is mark the ballot and mail it.

If people cannot bother to do that, their opinion shouldn't outweigh the wishes of people who actually vote. Yet that's what happens when low turnout dooms a property-tax request that otherwise would have passed.

The Legislature has done the right thing by referring a constitutional amendment to voters, asking them to modify the double-majority provision. A "yes" vote for Measure 56 will help Oregon return to democracy's basic ideal: one person, one vote.