

Vote yes on Oregon Measure 56

by The Oregonian editorial board

Thursday September 25, 2008, 4:48 PM

Measure 56 on the fall ballot would repair an undemocratic Oregon rule known as the "double majority."

A better name for it would be the "minority magnifier." Just ask parents in the Gladstone School District.

In a May 2005 election, school supporters in that community turned out in force to vote for a \$30 million construction bond. It was an ideal time for the election because bond rates were favorable and construction costs were forecast to rise.

Despite an overwhelming 62 percent "yes" vote, however, the measure failed. Under the "double majority" constitutional rule, property-tax proposals by schools and other local governments need more than a simple majority to pass; they also need a voter turnout of at least 50 percent unless it's a general election in an even-numbered year.

Gladstone's popular measure easily won a simple majority but the 43 percent turnout doomed it. Just 500 more votes would have provided the "double majority," and even if all 500 of those votes had been "no," the bond still would have passed.

Giving such power to nonvoters is worse than unfair. It's also foolhardy, as Gladstone's experience showed. The district was forced to wait until the 2006 November general election, when the "double majority" rule didn't apply, and easily passed the bond. By then, however, it cost \$10 million more because of ballooning construction costs.

Schools, cities and counties all across Oregon have struggled under the "double majority" since 1996, when voters passed a tax-limitation measure that quietly slipped the provision into the state constitution. Measure 56, referred to this November's ballot by the 2007 Legislature, would reform it in reasonable ways that would help avert such travesties as the 2005 Gladstone bond vote.

This measure would loosen rather than eliminate the "double majority." It would allow local governments to pass money measures by simple majorities in elections in the high-turnout months of May and November, while keeping the "double majority" rule in other months.

"Sneaker elections," the strongest original argument for the "double majority," are a thing of the past in Oregon. Laws have been revised to prevent local governments from passing tax increases in minor elections when voters aren't paying attention. Oregon's vote-by-mail system also helps render the old rationale obsolete.

In the past 10 years, in towns from Baker City to Beaverton, from Sweet Home to Scappoose, majorities of voters have passed 169 measures that failed for lack of the "double majority."

Oregonians should pass Measure 56 and reduce the power of nonvoters to trump the will of those who actually participate in our democracy.