

Petition seeks ban on last-day voter registration

By Brooks Dareff
Of the Emerald

An initiative is afoot that proposes cutting off Oregon voter registration twenty days before an election.

Since 1975 Oregon voters have been allowed to register right up until the closing of polls.

If implemented, this initiative would curtail voter participation, says Oregon Student Lobby Director Sherry Oeser, who fears "students in particular could be adversely affected."

Many people only start thinking about elections a few weeks in advance, says Oeser, and this may be especially true of the historically unparticipatory 18-25 age group.

A 20-day cutoff could particularly affect student participation in the November general elections, Oeser says. Since many students take up new residences in the fall — and voters are required to re-register if they change address — a new registration limit would mean many of these voters would have to register only several weeks after arriving in town.

The initiative, spearheaded by a political action group called

Oregonians in Action, is in the petition stage now. If 83,000 signatures are tallied by July 1984, the initiative would appear as a constitutional amendment on the general election ballot next November.

With about 20,000 fewer signatures, the initiative could be placed on the ballot as a statutory rather than a constitutional amendment, says John Reuling, special counsel to Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer. The 1975 bill rescinding the 20-day cutoff is statutory, and therefore reversible, through statutory channels.

In Oregon a bill or initiative can only become constitutional if it survives a popular referendum.

The idea for a petition-based initiative emerged following the regular legislative session, in which several bills attempting to rescind the 1975 bill died with the session in August, says Secretary of State Norma Paulus, a supporter of a 20-day cutoff.

Members of OIA, based in Wilsonville, include Rep. Donna Zajonc, R-Salem, who is also a member of the State Legislature

Elections Committee.

The reasons for turning back the clock to 1975 are two-fold, Paulus says.

County clerks object to the administrative overload that has resulted from no cutoff time, and they and others are concerned about the up-to-the-last-minute potential for residency fraud.



Emerald graphic

As a general trend, says Paulus, the increased mobility of modern society has made it difficult for anyone to pinpoint a person's per-

manent residence. Last-minute registration gives clerks no time to check for any kind of residence legitimacy and presumably offers advocates of one cause or candidate ample opportunity to hop from county to county cuckolding the clerks.

One situation that exhibited the particular inadequacy of current Oregon voter registration law, says Paulus, was one which was allowed to develop during the dissolution of Antelope and the incorporation of Rajneeshpuram. While the Rajneeshies met the requirements of residency law, the non-resident Antelope supporters who came in droves in an attempt to pack the vote, did not. While the aliens were eventually dissuaded by state authorities, a 20-day cutoff law would nip Antelope-like problems in the bud, Paulus says.

The failure of Oregon courts to address the legal definition of residency has not clarified an already blurry situation, Paulus adds.

Oeser maintains that the very mobility of society makes it all the more discriminatory to prevent individuals (especially particularly mobile people like students) from registering after a specified cutoff time.

While a cutoff law might decrease residency fraud, it would also disenfranchise legitimate voters, she says.

Oeser believes a bill sponsored by Common Cause in the 1983 regular legislative session could have adequately addressed the question of fraud. In the event of a close race, the Common Cause bill would have required investigation of the residency claims of all voters who registered not more than ten days before that particular election. Such a law would have allowed authorities to attack fraud, she says, rather than the assumption of fraud.

Paulus opposed that bill, she says, because it would have added to an already cumbersome burden suffered by the county clerks.

Oeser believes, on the other hand, that the system should be set up for the electorate and not to accommodate the bureaucracy.

"Why cut people out of the process?" Oeser asks. "We're supposed to be living in a democracy."

Paulus insists she is not advocating executing the former.

As a state legislator Paulus worked on — and for — the 1975 bill eliminating the cutoff date, intending, like others, to increase voter participation in the midst of the "voter malaise that settled over this country following Watergate." But she has since come aboutface on the issue, she says, because the bill was unsuccessful in its intent. Total voter participation has not increased since 1975, she says. Paulus could not, however, supply any figures that showed the effect eliminating the cutoff date had on student voter registration.

Paulus supported the successful 1983 vote-by-mail bill, intended to accommodate, in particular, the elderly, the disabled and those living in rural areas far removed from convenient voting booths. In contrast to dropping a cutoff date, vote-by-mail has extended voter participation, she says.

Oeser finds it "ironic" and somewhat baffling that supporters of vote-by-mail could concurrently support restoring a 20-day cutoff on voter registration. Vote-by-mail extends voter participation, whereas a 20-day registration cutoff would limit it, and the potential for fraud she says is much greater through the mail.

"To me their arguments are just not valid."

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House, Senate works to break tax logjam

SALEM (AP) — An Oregon House and Senate negotiating committee is resuming its work on a new compromise plan that's aimed at breaking the logjam over property tax relief.

Saying that things are "beginning to jell" on the new plan, House Speaker Grattan Kerans on Wednesday reappointed House members to the negotiating panel.

Kerans said that committee and others would begin work today on the plan proposed Tuesday by Gov. Vic Atiyeh. But the Eugene Democrat stopped short of

forecasting that the sales tax-based plan would be approved by the Legislature.

"I'm no longer in the business of predicting," said Kerans, who saw his own tax relief proposal defeated 35-23 by the House last weekend after he said he thought he could muster the votes to pass it.

Kerans had discharged House members of the joint conference committee after the House action.

Under Atiyeh's plan, the Legislature would approve a proposed ballot measure for a 4 percent retail sales tax.



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