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OPINION

editorials, letters, commentary and perspective

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Democracy is alive and well...barely

No matter how abused it may be, the Oregon initiative process is the epitome of voter power

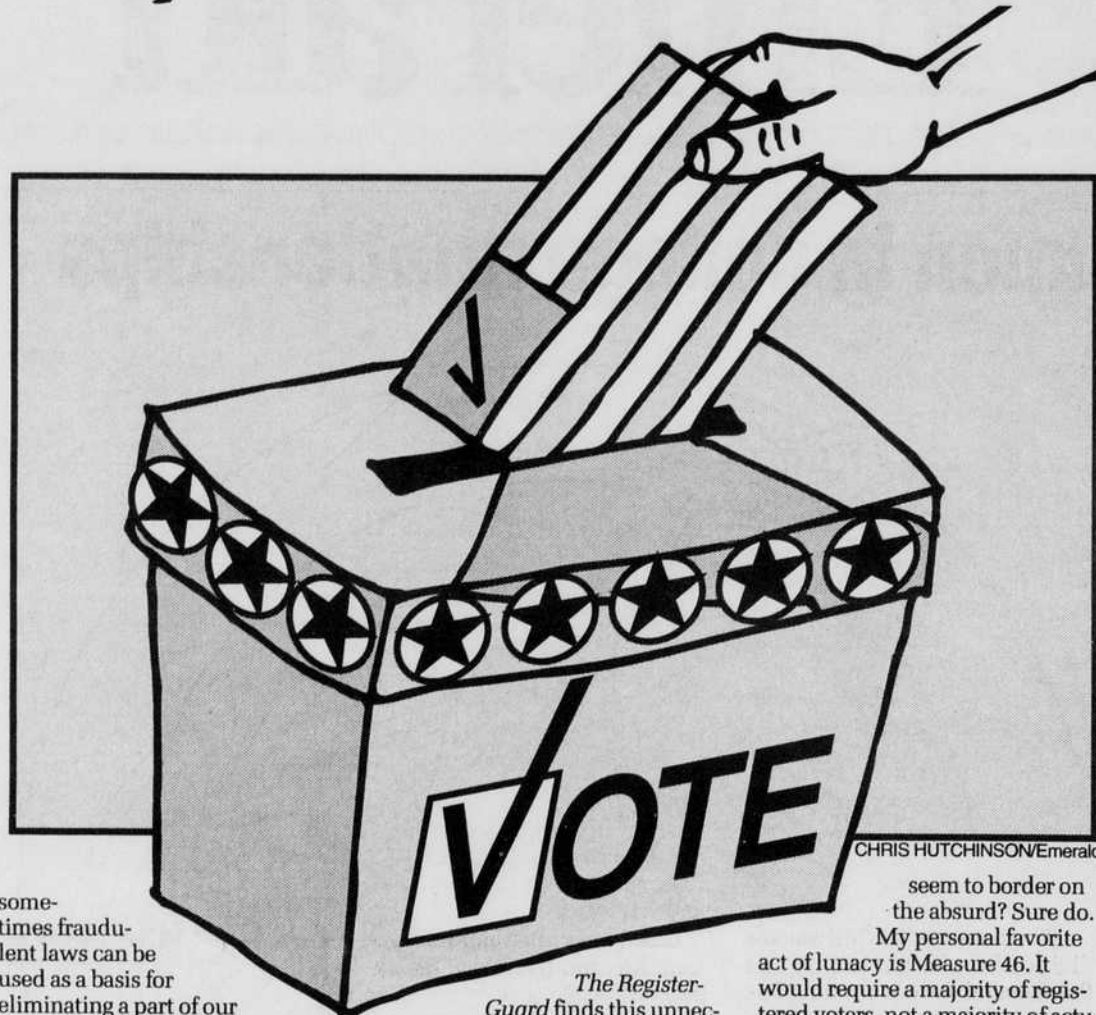
According to the Sept. 16 edition of *The Register-Guard*, it's just too costly and "reaches beyond just ballot overload" to allow people a direct say in how they will be governed. They point to the recent two-volume Voters' Pamphlet as a perfect example of self-government gone ridiculous. "Volume One will contain measures only and will feature 248 pages, making it the largest pamphlet in state history. What's to be done about this overload?"

The *Register-Guard's* editorial is just one in a series of similar complaints from all over the state. Opponents of the Oregon initiative process point to the current batch

of 23 ballot measures as proof that the process doesn't work, that it is often used to enact frivolous and foolish laws and that it is simply too costly to continue. What

these opponents seem to forget or deliberately ignore is that the initiative process is the closest thing we have to the exercise of pure democracy. It allows people to put political proposals directly before the voting public, and it allows that voting public to decide for or against those proposals.

Opponents urge that the initiative process be severely limited or even eliminated because many of the ballot measures are ill conceived, poorly worded and may do more harm than good. But, if the creation of foolish, frivolous and



sometimes fraudulent laws can be used as a basis for eliminating a part of our governing process, then our forms of government on local, state and federal levels would have been trashed years ago.

Is it a chore to wade through the 248-page pamphlet trying to make sense of the 23 ballot measures? Sure is. Each measure not only has the text of the measure and a neutral explanation of its possible effect, but also one or more arguments for and against it. Anyone with \$500 to spare or the time to gather 2500 signatures can get his or her argument in the pamphlet.

The Register-Guard finds this unnecessary and excessive, and proposes that in the future, the arguments be limited to one each per ballot measure. So who gets to make those arguments? The process of becoming an informed voter requires gathering all the information possible, pro and con, about each measure. If arguments in the pamphlet are limited, where do voters turn to get more information? Apparently, *The Register-Guard* hopes they will turn to its editorial pages for the "right" stuff. Do some of the ballot measures

seem to border on the absurd? Sure do. My personal favorite act of lunacy is Measure 46. It would require a majority of registered voters, not a majority of actual voters, to approve new taxes. When was the last time a majority of registered voters even voted, let alone voted the same way for anything? In a country so proud of its democratic traditions, voter turnout has often been less than half of the total registered to vote. And the total registered to vote never comes remotely close to the number who could vote if they simply quit complaining, got off their lazy asses and participated. Is the initiative process open to abuse? No doubt about it. Salem

eye surgeon Gordon Miller demonstrates that fact. He personally put up the money needed to push his personal agenda and get measures 35, 41 and 42 on the ballot. He hired the signature gatherers, paid for arguments in the Voters' Pamphlet, and for all I know personally crafted the words in the measure. All of Miller's measures would enact foolish, needless and, in the case of Measure 41, bizarre legislation. But Miller also demonstrates an inherent strength of the initiative process. The process allows any citizen who feels the need for change in the way government conducts its business to ask the rest of the voters to validate those feelings by actually forcing that change.

Is the process cumbersome? Yes. Does it require voters to do more homework, to become more involved in governing? Yes. But with all its flaws, the ballot measures represent a process that allows Oregonians to make decisions about how they will be governed. It provides a mechanism in which every citizen can become a direct player in the system of checks and balances that keeps our government from becoming too abusive and unresponsive to the people who are governed.

Instead of complaining about the size of the Voters' Pamphlet or about the foolishness of some of the measures voters are asked to decide about, we should be praising the Oregon initiative process as the purest form of democracy available to us. It should be held up as an important and perhaps vital part of our system of self-government, and Oregonians should be glad they live in a state where such participation is possible.

Larry Haft, a senior majoring in journalism, is a columnist for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.



OPINION

Larry Haft

LETTERS

Raise minimum wage

I'm no economist. When I hear complaints that raising Oregon's minimum wage would hamper some businesses, leading to inflation, my report is born of a simple lower-class logic.

If the business person feels a pinch in his or her pocketbook, perhaps his or her vacation to a tropical isle could be cut short a day or two. Or the next time they buy a piece of art, opt for one that is a few hundred dollars less than the last one. And for some, a little less caviar might be in order.

When I cast my yes vote for Measure 36, I do so to the tune of a bumper sticker I saved from the 80s: "Inflation isn't a natural disaster. It's caused by people who profit from it."

Star Holmberg
Eugene

Drugs commonplace

Don't get wrong! I'm a pot smoker who enjoys the wide variety of pipes and paraphernalia that can be found at each

ASUO Street Faire. I'm just curious how the conservative community can condone this. Are students' parents aware that the University chooses to make room for vendors who exist to assist their kids in getting high? The war on drugs really is a joke.

John Exline
Eugene

No fences

The election is just around the corner, and I would like to clear up the terrible mess that Measure 38 would cause because of the use of the wrong title in the measure. It is not about clean water but wants to ruin the way ranchers have lived for over a hundred years.

We have lived here on this century farm all our married lives, and my husband, Melvin's, grandfather homesteaded it, and he was born here. We have been planting the draws and the steep hills to grass to keep the sediment, our soil, from getting into the stream. We have a small creek

that runs through our place, but it goes dry in May or June, and we would not like to put two fences along it. Measure 38 is such that we and other ranchers would be forced to fence any creeks in our property.

This bill will force all livestock out of Oregon as very few ranchers can afford to either fence their streams (the definition of a stream is any location where water runs two weeks a year) or sell their livelihood — the livestock.

This measure is for lawyers, for if someone sees an animal drinking out of a pond or stream on your land, they can sue you. You would then have to hire a lawyer to defend you and then pay your attorney as well as your opponent's if you lose. Farmers are not so rich that they can afford to pay lawyers at their high fees. Therefore, fences are the only solution.

Farmers already have fences along the road to keep their stock off and boundary fences to keep up, so these fences will

fall down and be a tangled mess. Oregon will have to fence their rivers, with the exception of the Willamette and Columbia. At \$10,000 a mile, that will take a huge chunk of money from taxpayers' pockets. Also, there will have to be more employees to pay to keep these fences repaired especially when deer and elk get hung up in them.

Everyone wants clean water, but this is a bad measure. Our rivers are clean and the livestock drink out of them, but they want to say that the temperature of the water when it gets warm makes the water polluted. But it is the sun and hot weather that make the water warm and only God can change this.

There are sensible ways to make the water in our state cleaner, but this measure is not one of them. Please go to the polls and vote no on this bad bill as we don't need Oregon fenced. Thank you for voting no on 38.

Joan Lathrop
Wallowa

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