

Ballot measure descriptions confuse student voters

Students find the voter's pamphlet unhelpful in clarifying initiatives

By Eric Collins
Oregon Daily Emerald

Paul Rogers sat down with his vote-by-mail ballot, opened his Oregon Measures Voter's Pamphlet and delved into the process. It wasn't so easy.

The 20-year-old biology junior was hit with 14 initiatives he knew little about.

Measure 63 especially troubled him. He read, "A yes vote allows passage of greater-than-majority voting requirements only by equally large majority."

Huh? So he formed a strategy. "If I find a measure that I can't understand very easily, I just say no because it may be another way that they can take away my rights or somebody else's rights," he said. "There's a lot of them in here that I read over, I didn't understand it, and so I said no."

Not all students follow this strategy, but a random sampling of University students showed that they too knew little else than medical marijuana, stiffer penalties for marijuana possession and clear-cuts and forest practices on this year's ballot. However, advocates

of the political process have advice for confused voters: vote what you know and take the time to understand the issues that will directly affect you.

While Rogers had already voted no on Measure 63, his two friends sitting next to him outside the EMU Monday were still making up their minds. They read the measure's explanation and were confused about what it did and who supported it.

Seeing Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill Sizemore's name as a committee member, biochemistry junior Laura Breshears, 23, thought he sponsored the bill.

Saying she always disagreed with the initiatives that Sizemore has supported in the past, she said she'd probably vote "no" on the measure.

"He does this every year," she said, shaking her head.

But on careful reading of the voter's pamphlet, one sees that Oregon Taxpayers United sponsored the opposition to the measure. Sizemore happens to be executive director of the organization. So voting "no"

would actually cause Breshears to vote in agreement with Sizemore.

Would other voters make the same mistakes?

David Buchanan thinks problems lie in the explanatory statements and on the confusion of the outcome of "yes" and "no" votes. Buchanan, executive director of Oregon Common Cause — a nationally affiliated organization that lobbies for campaign finance reform as well as monitors the government, voter registration and election laws — said while the explanatory statement is supposed to be impartial and agreed upon by both sides, it sometimes doesn't help a voter.

"Usually those two sentences are mirror images, and they don't say what the voter needs to know about it," said Buchanan, whose organization is in favor of Measure 63.

Then there's the problem of what a "yes" and "no" vote accomplishes, Buchanan said. These days, a "yes" vote can mean no and a "no" vote can mean yes, he explained. He pointed to Measure 53, on the ballot last May, which asked voters to keep or eliminate the 50 percent voter turnout requirement. If voters said yes, they would be saying no to the turnout requirement. But if they said no, they would be keeping the turnout

requirement.

If a voter such as Rogers were to just say no out of frustration, he would be saying yes to the turnout requirement. In fact, Buchanan sees "confusion" as a legitimate campaign strategy for a measure's opposition. Measures can be voted down because the opposition depicts the measure as uncertain and confusing.

Buchanan advises voters to consider that they have three choices in each measure: yes, no or none. If they don't feel that an issue warrants their time to understand it, they can just not vote on it.

"I think that's rational and just a legitimate part of democracy as voting is," he said.

The Oregon Student Association has singled out a few of the 14 measures they do think warrant a student's time in the October OSA Outlook. Not advocating any political position on the measures, the OSA has published a voter's guide highlighting the pre-paid tuition, vote-by-mail and other measures that have the potential outcome to affect higher education.

Measure 59's supposed impact on student incidental fees does not appear in it. However, lawyers have said the measure would affect the use of student incidental fees on state university campuses.

In the opinion of Paul Gamson

of Smith, Gamson, Diamond & Olney Attorneys in Portland, Measure 59 would prohibit student fees to be used for "political purposes." This could limit the ASUO's ability to lobby state legislators about university funding and tuition rates, he writes. It could also mean candidate debates sponsored by campus groups wouldn't be allowed, since the debates would be much like political statements in the state's voter's pamphlet.

"Student groups would no longer be free to decide how to best use their funds," Gamson wrote in a statement.

Although this outcome "is not listed as one of the things [Measure 59] would do," Shaun Sieren, organizing director for OSA, said students should be aware of the measure's possible impact.

The OSA is also advising students to look at the financial impact of measures and consider them as a potential competitor for higher education funding.

With all the advice regarding how to vote, Buchanan suggests going on instincts is legitimate too. He said he's seen a tendency in young people to think, "If I haven't done enough studying, I shouldn't vote." However, he says that voting based on what you already know and think is just as valid.



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