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Proposal supporters intend to fine-tune initiative system

■ But opponents of Ballot Measures 78 and 79 say they would take power out of the hands of Oregonians

By Darren Freeman
Oregon Daily Emerald

Two measures on the May 16 primary ballot would amend the Oregon Constitution to alter the state's pacesetting initiative process.

Measure 78 would allow the secretary of state's office 30 days to count and verify the signatures and qualify initiatives as ballot measures. The office currently has 15 days.

Measure 79 would increase the number of signatures needed to place initiatives proposing constitutional amendments on a general election ballot from 8 percent of the voting population to 12 percent.

Supporters say the measures would fine-tune the initiative process, while detractors don't like the sound of the proposals, saying they are parts of a larger legislative campaign to limit Oregonians' voices in the lawmaking process.

Debate over Measure 78 has been sedate compared to arguments over Measure 79. Nonetheless, positions have been staked on both sides of the issue.

Supporters and opponents alike say Measure 78 would ease the duties of the secretary of state's office, which verified more than 2 million signatures in 1996 and expects to see as many as 3 million this year.

"We barely were able to finish the process in the 15 days in 1996," Oregon director of elections Colleen Sealock said, adding that the office would be able to more professionally perform its duty if allowed the additional time.

Opponents say the measure

would postpone notification of qualifying initiatives, however, and thereby would delay campaigns' strategy planning.

"We're somewhat concerned that it's another way to delay the initiative process," Becky Miller, executive of assistant of Oregon Taxpayers United, said.

"Though it's more convenient for the secretary of state, it's inconvenient for petition gatherers," she said. "Because the initiative process is to serve the people and not the secretary of state, we feel a 'no' vote is in order."

On the other hand, supporters say the inconvenience for political campaigns would be minimal, while the benefit to the secretary of state's office would be great.

Oregon Taxpayers United, headed by Bill Sizemore, has taken a much more passionate stand against Measure 79, arguing that its passage would exclude poorly-funded grassroots organizations, which are unable to bankroll major petition campaigns, from the initiative process.

"People like us will still have the money to put a measure on the ballot," Miller said, referring to Oregon Taxpayers United. "All it's going to do is lock out everyday people."

"Increasing the signatures required by 50 percent is a huge increase and is unnecessary," said Dane Waters, president of the national Initiative and Referendum Institute. "This is a full frontal assault on the initiative process."

Waters said Measure 79, which the Oregon Legislature referred to the ballot, is the result of two factors — politicians' distrust of the initiative process and the pressuring of special interests, such as the logging lobby, which is often targeted by initiatives.

Supporters of the measure, however, say it's in the best interest of the state and is intended to protect the Oregon Constitution.

Ken Tollenaar, a retired University faculty member and member of the Oregon Initiative Committee, pointed out that the measure would only affect proposed constitutional amendments and not initiative statutory additions, which require 6 percent of the voting population to make an initiative a ballot measure.

Measure 78

The state ballot measure would increase the number of days from 15 to 30 that the secretary of state's office has to verify signatures needed to qualify initiatives as ballot measures.

Supporters say the secretary of state's office needs the additional 15 days to review the increasing number of initiatives filed in Oregon.

Opponents say the measure would delay the initiative process and cut time out of campaigns' strategy sessions.

Measure 79

The state ballot measure would increase the number of signatures needed to place initiatives proposing constitutional amendments on the ballot from 8 percent of the voting population to 12 percent.

Supporters say the Oregon Constitution is being cluttered with amendments that should be filed as statutory amendments. They say the measure would encourage filers of initiatives to focus on enacting statutory changes.

Opponents say the increased requirement will block grassroots campaigns, which are inadequately funded to gather the additional signatures, from proposing necessary constitutional amendments. They say the measure is part of a legislative effort to weaken the initiative process.

"Campaigns might have to raise a little more money if they insist on putting their measures in the constitution, but they could always propose a statutory change," Tollenaar said. "The constitution is supposed to be the basic contract between people and their government; it's a very poor vehicle to enact public change."

Measure 79 has garnered the support of the American Civil Liberties Union for the same reason.

"We're always concerned about proposed changes to the Oregon Bill of Rights," ACLU assistant director Jann Carson said. "Its purpose is to protect the minority from the whims and the oppression of the majority."

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