

Oregon voters rejects Measure 103 banning grocery tax

The Associated Press

Oregon voters have again rejected an initiative that would have overhauled the state's tax system.

This time it was Measure 103, which would have prohibited most new taxes on groceries and banned soda taxes anywhere in the state. The initiative was losing by nearly 20 percentage points in early returns Tuesday with more than 1 million votes counted.

Measure 103 was in large part a reaction to Measure 97, the failed, union-backed initiative from 2016 that sought to raise \$3 billion a year with a broad tax on business revenue. Legislators have subsequently considered a similar gross-receipts tax, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Grocers and soda companies sought to preempt that, spending \$5.3 million on Measure 103 to exempt

them and their products from new taxes, with most of the money coming from the American Beverage Association. But the big companies had no better results this year than the unions did two years ago.

Measure 103 backers pitched it as a ban on taxing food, but campaign finance records show the real focus was on one element of the initiative: a sweeping ban on soda

taxes. Oregon has no soda taxes now, and Measure 103 was meant to ensure it never would.

A handful of communities across the country have established soda taxes, either to discourage consumption of unhealthy beverages or to raise money for public spending. Academic studies have shown sales fall sharply in communities with soda taxes.

Most of the money in

support of the initiative came from the American Beverage Association, which sought to amend Oregon's constitution to establish a tax exemption for its industry, along with a prohibition on its products ever being taxed.

Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire and former mayor of New York, gave \$2.1 million to the campaign against Measure 103. He's an advocate for taxing soda

as a means to improving public health.

Public unions and big companies, including Nike, formed a rare alliance and spent heavily in opposition of the ballot initiative. Unions feared it would limit public spending, while businesses worried that exempting grocers and soda companies would push any new taxes onto other industries at a disproportionate rate.

Oregon voter turnout was not high in 2018 general election

By Betsy Hammon
The Oregonian

Oregon voters have had their say. At least 1.75 million Oregonians cast ballots and decided a governor's race, the balance of power in the Legislature, the fate of state and local measures and more.

Here are five key take-aways:

1. The biggest races — the governor's contest and five statewide ballot measures — were lopsided victories for Democrats and labor.

Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, won her re-election race against moderate Republican Knute Buehler by about 6 percentage points.

Measures to ban taxes on soda and other groceries, to end Oregon's sanctuary protections for immigrants and to restrict public spending on abortion went down by even larger margins (a gigantic 16 percentage points, 26 percentage points and 28 percentage points, respectively).

Polls that suggested some of these might be close were wrong. The pro-Brown anti-measures coalition, heavily funded by public employee unions and joined by national pro-Democrat political action committees, didn't just win. They dominated.

2. Voter turnout wasn't high.

Unlike the national narrative and what seemed to be the case early in the election cycle in Oregon, turnout among Oregon voters didn't set a 25-year record or even come close. It didn't even match 2014.

The high early voter turnout in Oregon was exactly that: early. It was not extra. In the end, at least 1.75 million voters, and probably a bit more, cast ballots. That is unlikely to match the 70.6 percent turnout rate from the 2014 midterm election or the 71.9 percent turnout recorded in 2010, when Republican Chris Dudley came close to defeating Democrat John Kitzhaber for governor.

Despite the hype, plenty of registered Oregon voters, even those who registered as Democrats or Republicans, sat out.

3. Oregon voters, at least in the three-county Portland metro area, care about schoolchildren.

All three metro-area school

money measures on the ballot — in North Clackamas, Tigard-Tualatin and Oregon City — passed handily.

4. Dennis Richardson, Oregon's Republican secretary of state, is a political unicorn and may remain so for some time.

When Richardson won statewide office in 2016, he was the first Republican to do so in 14 years. He planted a stake in blue Oregon as a Republican who could win big, suggesting others could too.

Many thought Buehler, a moderate Republican who broke with President Trump and cast himself as a bipartisan willing to broker smart policy compromises, could win or at least come close. Not so.

He did not show the way for other Oregon GOP candidates to find victory either.

Richardson has two more years in office. But Republicans were rebuffed in their runs not only for governor but for the state House and Senate. And they can't find solace or signs of near-term statewide victories in any results of Tuesday's election.

5. Democrats' new super majority in both chambers of the Oregon Legislature means corporate tax hikes and progressive policy changes could be an easy sell in the 2019 session.

Proponents of Measure 104 sought to restrict the ability of Oregon lawmakers to raise taxes and fees, requiring a three-fifths majority in both chambers to approve not only outright tax

hikes but also other policy changes that would increase revenues. Voters said no.

But it might not have

mattered. Oregon voters have installed a three-fifths majority of Democrats in both the state House and

Senate starting in January 2019. Oregonians can expect that controversial progressive policies as well as tax or

fee hikes will find a more receptive audience among that three-fifths super majority in the next legislative session.

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