

MY TURN – Oregon's initiative process does not require big bucks
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DAWN PHILLIPS
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The process of putting issues before voters in a statewide election was never intended to be a popularity contest of what most Oregonians were talking about.

It was designed to be an avenue for frustrated citizens to seek relief when state and local government would not address their concerns. Oregon spearheaded the initiative and referendum process when it was enacted by a statewide vote in 1902, promoted by William U'Ren, a leader in the Legislature and a member of the People's Party.

Judging from his words in Jerry Boone's column on the initiative process ("What money buys, what's on voters' minds," Metro Aug. 9), Rep. Chuck Riley, D-Hillsboro, has a distorted sense of reality.

Riley claims no issues would make it on the ballot if they didn't have big-money backers to pay for gathering signatures. Not true.

In 1910, 32 measures were on the ballot, and I doubt there were professional clipboard packers outside Fred Meyer. Vote-by-mail in 1998 used an all-volunteer signature collection drive. Measure 30 (the billion dollar tax-hike referendum) and Measure 36 (the Defense of Marriage initiative) were also volunteer efforts for the most part.

These issues don't matter to people in Riley's district? Why did both pass with such wide margins in his legislative district and statewide? Someone in Cornelius must care about taxes and gay marriage.

Sometimes measures have to go on the ballot because that's the only way to change the Oregon Constitution. For example, four of the 10 ballot measures coming up in November are constitutional changes. You can't go to the Legislature and amend the Constitution.

Riley also claims people are tired of signing signature petitions. Supporters of the 10 initiatives that qualified for the ballot and several others that didn't turned in hundreds of thousands of signatures; where did they come from? Someone must care enough to sign the petition sheets. County clerks' offices around the state verified they were real signatures.

Riley says he was disappointed an initiative to upgrade health care didn't make it to the November ballot. What about Measure 44 to cover more low-income families with prescription drug coverage?

He says voters in his area don't know how the Legislature should "get kids a good education." That's because the Legislature hasn't been able to hold down costs such as teacher benefits (PERS, health care, etc.), and the bureaucracy wants to maintain the status quo.

It may take passage of a spending-limit initiative or one to require 65 percent of all education dollars go into the classroom before the school establishment finally gets its act together to provide a quality, cost-effective education for Oregon's children.

The bottom line: Riley's arguments make no sense. You can get a measure on the ballot without gobs of money. Every idea on the ballot doesn't have to be what some guy in Forest Grove tells Representative Riley when he knocks on the front door.

If voters in Riley's district really care about something passionately, they can get together, form a group, and go out and collect signatures just like any one else. It's called "democracy."

Dawn Phillips of Hillsboro is a legislative assistant for six Republican state representatives and a former state Republican Party spokeswoman.

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