

May 2010 #10-12

Summary:

Ballot Initiative 50 offers an opportunity to change the process of legislative redistricting. Removing the process from the hands of the often self-serving legislature and putting it into the hands of a non-partisan commission would benefit all Oregonians.

Word Count 633

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Opportunity Knocks with Redistricting

By Karla Kay Edwards

It is obvious from the voting results of Measures 66 and 67 (and of several other recent ballot measures) that constituents in most rural counties have different ideas about taxation and the role of government than do residents of counties with a larger urban population. Many are frustrated and concerned that the voices of rural communities always will fail to be heard.

But with the 2010 Census comes the redistricting of Oregon’s state legislature and an opportunity to begin to shift, ever so slightly, the influence of rural citizens. Oregonians are currently subject to legislative district lines that have diminished the voice of rural voters over the last ten years. This was accomplished by former Secretary of State Bill Bradbury in some key areas of the state by gerrymandering district lines to include just enough of an urban population to outnumber rural constituents in districts that are predominantly rural.

The Oregon Constitution entrusts the state legislature with the responsibility of drawing district lines that meet the conditions outlined in it. If the legislature fails to craft a plan, or the plan is overturned by the courts, then the responsibility falls on the Secretary of State. Since 1961, the Secretary of State has drafted the redistricting plan that was eventually adopted. It is hard to say with a straight face that partisanship has not played a role in the drawing of district lines. Whether Democrat or Republican, the body drawing district lines will try to protect its power, even though this is expressly prohibited by Oregon’s Constitution.

We have an opportunity to change this process for the better. A proposed Constitutional amendment entitled “The Independent Redistricting Commission Amendment,” or Initiative Petition 50, is currently being circulated for signatures. This amendment would create a non-partisan redistricting commission made up of five retired trial judges, one from each Congressional district.

Several other states have adopted similar independent, non-partisan committees to oversee their redistricting process, including our neighboring states of Washington and California. In 1983 Washington passed constitutional Amendment 74, establishing a five-member independent redistricting commission which forwards their recommendations back to the state legislature for approval. Most recently, in 2008 California passed Proposition 11, establishing a Citizen Redistricting Commission composed of fourteen members. Twenty-one states currently have varying types of redistricting commissions that draw up a plan, advise the legislature on developing the plan, or act as the back-up if the state legislature fails to devise a plan for legislative districts. The remaining twenty-nine states are redistricted by their state legislatures.



With the upcoming census and the projection that Oregon actually may gain a U.S. Congressional seat, timing is critical for the passage of such an amendment. Through a strong signature gathering effort and a proper campaign strategy, Oregonians can have an opportunity to present for referendum a redistricting process free of the obvious conflict of interest that now exists. Although this may not directly provide a stronger voice for rural citizens, in all likelihood it would lead to districts that are more centrist, rather than to “safe” seats for far-leaning party politicians. In turn, this would influence the legislature to be more sensitive to issues that affect all Oregonians, not only urban residents, who tend to favor higher taxes and bigger government—as illustrated by the result of Measures 66 and 67.

You can help get this measure on the November 2010 ballot by going to the website <http://www.petition50.com/> and printing a single signature petition. The petition has prepaid postage and is set up to be folded, taped, and mailed. More than 110,000 valid signatures must be submitted by July 2, 2010 for the petition to qualify for the November 2010 ballot. (Note: You must print the petition, sign it, and mail the hard copy. You cannot print a petition for anyone else.)

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