Guest Opinion

State initiatives, local tax measures muddle election picture

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by Mike Riley

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While Oregon's two major parties will have a lot to say about what happens in the state's gubernatorial election this November, the statewide initiatives, local tax measures and minor party candidates will also have a significant impact on the outcome.

Because it's not a presidential election year, far fewer voters are expected to weigh in this fall -- less than two in five registered voters participated in Oregon's May primary. While the two major parties will do all they can to motivate the faithful, peripheral issues will play important roles.

The Constitution and Libertarian candidates will draw votes from Ron Saxton, while the Pacific Green candidate will siphon votes from Gov. Ted Kulongoski. The collective impact of the spoilers appears to help Kulongoski's chances.

Tax measures

Depending on where you live, there may also be a hefty number of tax measures on the ballot, ranging from school operating measures, school building funds, police and sheriff levies, fire and rescue measures, library levies, parks and recreation funding, as well as Metro's new greenspace measure.

Based on our recent Portland-area poll regarding tax priorities, none of those expected measures was greeted with broad support. While the most favored among them appear to be for schools and public safety, the funding requests should bring out both supporters and opponents.

Conventional wisdom says that when lots of tax measures are on the ballot, fiscally conservative voters will be motivated to weigh in. While education supporters appear to be the most ardent constituency, the majority of measures will not attract many new voters, so the impact on the governor's race will likely be nominal.

Statewide initiatives

The 10 statewide initiatives that have qualified for the ballot tell a different story.

Most of the initiatives will attract more Republican voters. Examples include:

- Measure 39, which limits the state's ability to condemn private property;
- Measure 40, which says judges should be elected by district;
- Measure 41 which allows Oregonian taxpayers to exempt federal taxes;
- Measure 43, which requires parental notification prior to minor's abortions; and
- Measure 48, which imposes a state spending limit.

The other measures are also arguably conservative to neutral in nature, but will likely have less impact on the turnout.

Under most circumstances, these initiatives would help Saxton, but the measure likely to have the biggest impact on turnout is Measure 43 (parental notification), and if anti-abortion candidate Mary Starrett remains on the ballot, the decisive faith-based communities may throw their votes to her, while pro-choice voters are more likely to choose Kulongoski.

For now, the tax measures, the initiatives, the third-party candidates, and all of the various constituents they attract cloud the potential outcome this fall.

Taken together, many of these issues have the potential to rob Kulongoski of his natural advantages of incumbency and party registration. But for now, it's too close to call.

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