

Familiar-sounding measure returns to ballot

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Oregon voters have seen Measure 64 before. Similar initiatives to prohibit public funds from being spent for political purposes — a proposal that would limit how money collected through public payroll deductions could be spent — appeared on ballots in 1998 and 2000, and were rejected by voters.

Anti-tax activist Bill Sizemore, who is behind the measures, believes that government, through its payroll deduction system, should not, for example, help unions that represent public employees — teachers, nurses and firefighters — collect dues via payroll deduction when some of the collected money will go toward political campaigns.

He argues that by helping to facilitate such deductions, governments fail to remain neutral.

“Oregon is violating a fundamental principle of democracy,” he said.

His measure would ban money that government employees agree to have deducted from their paychecks from being used for political purposes.

Voters rejected Sizemore’s 1998 version by a slim margin, and two measures on the 2000 ballot by slightly wider margins.

Sizemore said he spent no money to campaign for those measures while unions spent millions opposing them.

“That is not rejection by the voters. That is the unions buying an election,” he said.

Sizemore said he’s following a tried and true political formula by bringing the measure back a fourth time, noting that school districts, cities and counties will often bring back bonds and levies for a second or third go-round after voters reject them on the first pass.

Voters rejected Measure 5, which cut and capped property taxes, several times in the 1980s before finally supporting it in 1990, he said.

He keeps bringing the payroll deduction measure back because it was identified by a group of about 150 to 200 people at a Oregon Taxpayers United convention as a top concern in 1994, Sizemore said.

A coalition of unions, charities, environmental groups and politicians have formed to fight Measure 64. They say it would unfairly restrict public employee decisions about their payroll deductions, would have unintended and harmful consequences for charitable groups that currently get funded through workplace deductions, and does nothing to restrict the ability of big corporations through their election spending to influence state politics.

Union members already can restrict their dues from being used for political purposes by filling out a form.

The United Way of Lane County hasn't taken a position on Measure 64 because of a long-standing "no advocacy" position regarding public policy issues, said local United Way spokeswoman Cheryl Crumbley. The agency often tries to educate legislators about the impact of particular legislation, but stops short of taking a stand, she said.

That's not the case for other United Way agencies in Oregon. Several have joined with dozens of other charitable groups to oppose Measure 64.

Earth Share is among them. The nonprofit group functions much like the United Way, as an umbrella agency raising money through payroll deductions to distribute to a range of local, regional and national environmental groups.

Groups such as the Eugene-based Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, Oregon Wild, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and 1000 Friends of Oregon all receive money from Earth Share, said the Oregon agency's executive director, Trudy Toliver.

Some of the money Earth Share raises goes to groups that do political advocacy, she said.

Sizemore says he's revised Measure 64 so it allows payroll-deducted money to be used for lobbying politicians — as opposed to running political campaigns.

"If a charity is acting like a charity, they won't violate this measure, and they have nothing to fear from it," he said.

But if Measure 64 passes, local environmental groups might find themselves heavily fined by the state or restricted from workplace fundraising if they send their members messages about land use legislation or pesticide reporting laws, to use a couple of local examples, Toliver said.