

## Restoring confidence in Oregon's initiative

by **The Oregonian editorial board**

**Saturday March 28, 2009, 10:30 AM**

Three important bills involving Oregon's initiative system are being considered in Salem, and one thing about them needs to be made clear right away:

All three legislative proposals would strengthen, not weaken, the state's cherished process of direct democracy.

The system needs shoring up because it is being abused.

When Oregon voters adopted the initiative by an overwhelming margin in 1902, they couldn't have envisioned that a century later the system would be hijacked by professionals, wealthy hobbyists and out-of-state special interests pushing narrow ideologies and pet projects.

Because Oregon's initiative system is one of the nation's least restrictive, it has become a cottage industry for a handful of these parties. Foremost among them is Bill Sizemore, who used the initiative to place a raft of measures on last fall's ballot, even though the Oregon Supreme Court had unanimously upheld lower court verdicts that organizations controlled by Sizemore violated anti-racketeering laws by forging signatures and filing false financial reports.

[House Bill 2005](#), proposed by Secretary of State [Kate Brown](#), would help her office guard against such violations. It would do so by forbidding the counting of signatures on petitions collected by anyone convicted of fraud, forgery or identity theft, and by giving elections officials access to police databases to check the criminal history of paid signature gatherers.

The bill would also improve the integrity of the system by giving elections officials more time to verify signatures and to do background checks of prospective signature gatherers. Among other reasonable reforms, the bill would also allow both civil and criminal enforcement of violations.

On Monday, a House panel will hold hearings on two other worthy initiative reform bills.

One of them, pushed by a good-government advocacy group -- [Healthy Democracy Oregon](#) -- and a host of legislative co-sponsors, would create a citizen-review process to examine initiative measures, make recommendations on them and work for a better-informed public. No one can say those aren't appealing goals, but the legislation offering higher impact is the second package, a proposal for an "indirect initiative."

This plan would require initiatives with qualifying signatures to be submitted to the next Legislature, which would have three options: Enact the initiative into law, making an election unnecessary; do nothing, sending the measure to appear on the next general election ballot; or approve an alternative proposal, allowing voters to decide which proposal they prefer.

None of these bills would create veto power over a citizen initiative. To the contrary, they would help restore confidence in a system Brown aptly describes as "an important part of our political DNA as Oregonians."

This time-honored system isn't going away, nor should it, but it sorely needs a tune-up to better serve Oregon citizens in the new millennium.