Letter to the Editor, Voting No

By E.F. Riley

This letter to the editor written by E. F. Riley was published in the May 29, 1915 issue of the Oregon Voter, a conservative weekly magazine issued between 1915 and 1983. In his letter, Riley referred to the state 'initiative and referendum,' which voters approved as an amendment to the Oregon constitution in 1902.

In 1892, reform-minded Oregonians formed the state Populist Party, called the People’s Power League. In 1897, voters elected populist William S. U'Ren to the state legislature. Once there, he and other populist legislators pushed for the passage of the initiative and referendum, an idea for direct democracy they took from James W. Sullivan’s 1893 book, Direct Legislation by the Citizenship through the Initiative and Referendum. In the late 1890s, the legislature passed the amendment and forwarded it to the voters for a popular election. In 1902, Oregonians approved the initiative and referendum with a 78 percent majority. In subsequent years, voters approved more populist measures which together became known as the “Oregon System,” including direct primaries and the ability to recall elected officials.

The initiative allowed voters to use petitions to directly add constitutional amendments and laws to ballots. The referendum allowed legislators to refer laws to a popular vote. Citizens could also use petitions to force legislators to refer laws to voters.

From its inception, the initiative and referendum have been controversial. The May 1, 1915 issue of the Oregon Voter stated that “You can’t escape it, this Oregon System of ours. Upon you, voters of Oregon, rests an individual responsibility. You personally must legislate ... If you dodge your duty as a citizen, don’t complain when an active minority puts over damaging, costly and confusing legislation.”

Between 1902 and 2002, Oregonians voted on nearly 800 initiative and referendum measures, passing almost half of them. Through this process, Oregon voters have made numerous amendments to the state constitution, established state colleges, granted women the right to vote, abolished and then restored the death penalty, repealed and then reinstated the state income tax, attempted to clean up the Willamette River, and increased minimum hourly wages.

Further Reading: Sullivan, James W. Direct Legislation by the Citizenship through the Initiative and Referendum. New York, N.Y., 1893.


Oregon History Project

http://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/letter-to-the-editor-voting-no/