

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/12/13/evidence-from-oregon-shows-that-citizens-initiative-reviews-can-improve-voters-decision-making-about-ballot-measures/>

# Evidence from Oregon shows that Citizens' Initiative Reviews can improve voters' decision-making about ballot measures



*Citizens in many US states practice direct democracy through voting on statewide ballot measures. But do voters actually have all the information they need to make judgments about a measure's likely effects? In 2011, Oregon adopted a Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) process, where randomly-selected citizen review boards evaluate ballot proposals to improve their fellow voters' decision-making. In new research, [John Gastil](#) finds that reading one such statement on proposed criminal justice legislation increased voters' opposition to the measure, though it did not prevent its passage.*

From Brexit in the UK to innumerable controversial initiatives on abortion rights, tax policy, and everything imaginable in the US, recent experiences with direct democracy have given many observers pause. I do not take a position in this debate, but I can share recent findings about the efficacy of one attempt to *improve* such elections.

As an academic, I have had the rare privilege of having my most outlandish ideas taken seriously. Seventeen years ago, I authored a book that proposed a novel electoral reform. In [\*By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy through Deliberative Elections\*](#), I proposed establishing randomly-selected citizen review boards to evaluate candidates and ballot proposals. My timing was awful: That was the year George W. Bush. (sort of) defeated Al Gore, by the margin of a few

hanging chads, and my book (sort of) advocated making voters' ballots more complicated.

A decade later, two young Oregon activists with freshly minted public policy degrees took my core idea more seriously and lobbied their legislature to try out my proposal. In 2009, that state's government authorized a trial of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review, and in 2011 they made it a permanent fixture. With funding from the National Science Foundation, I have carefully studied that process.

The idea behind the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) is simple. It aims to improve a larger electoral process by linking it up with a small deliberative body. The CIR gathers a representative cross-section of 20-24 voters for 4-5 days of deliberation on a single ballot measure. The process culminates in the citizen panelists writing a Citizens' Statement that the Secretary of State inserts into the official *Voters' Pamphlet* sent to each registered voter.

The CIR panel bears considerable resemblance to other small 'minipublics', sometimes called "Citizens' Juries," "Planning Cells," or "Consensus Conferences." These smaller processes also bear a family resemblance to larger minipublics, such as "Deliberative Polls" and "Citizen Assemblies," all of which have shown up in the UK at one time or another. What sets the CIR apart from almost all of these is that it isn't designed to simply render a public judgment, or glimpse a more reflective public opinion; rather, it aims to *influence directly* a wider electorate.

Our research examined whether the first iteration of the CIR in 2010 had an impact on voters. Our first study used an online survey experiment to show that reading this Statement influenced Oregon voters' values tradeoffs, issue knowledge, and vote intentions. Our second study used regression analysis of a cross-sectional phone survey to show a parallel association between the Citizens' Statement's use and voting choices but yielded some mixed findings.

## **Testing the impact of the Citizens' Initiative Review**

The particular policy issue addressed by this 2010 CIR process was Oregon Measure 73. This measure's ballot title said that it "requires increased minimum sentences for certain repeated sex crimes, incarceration for repeated driving under influence." This included raising "major felony sex crime" minimums from 70-100 months up to

300 months and setting a 90-day minimum class C felony sentence for a second offense of driving under influence of intoxicants.

A September phone survey pegged statewide voter support for the sentencing measure at 67-73 percent, but the CIR panelists wrote a scathing critique and sided against it 21-3. The testimony against the measure carried considerable sway during the CIR's five-day deliberations, which [revealed potential unintended consequences](#) of the proposed law even its proponents had not considered fully.

The balance of evidence across our two studies showed that reading the 2010 Oregon CIR Statement on Measure 73 reduced support for that law—though not enough to stop its passage. We couldn't estimate from the data the precise net impact on final ballot tallies in Oregon, because there exists no definitive measure of what percentage of Oregon voters read the CIR panel's Citizens' Statement. Our surveys showed that over forty percent of voters became familiar with the CIR that year, with most of those reporting reading the CIR Statement.

"Our research showed that the CIR can serve as an effective means of increasing the accuracy of voters' policy beliefs in initiative elections by increasing their knowledge of important facts about the policy in question."

John Gastil of Penn State University writes that evidence from Oregon shows that Citizens' Initiative Reviews can improve voters' decision-making about ballot measures.

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog)

74 Measures | Measure 97  
Proposed by initiative petition to be voted on at the General Election, November 8, 2010

**Ballot Title**  
**97**

Increases corporate minimum tax \$25 million; funds education, health care, and other programs.

Estimate of Financial Impact  
Text of Measure  
Explanatory Statement  
Citizens' Review Statement  
Arguments in Favor  
Arguments in Opposition

LSE  
USCentre

USAPP  
United States Politics and Policy

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Our survey experiment found that reading the CIR Statement doubled the number of voters at least leaning against the sentencing measure, and our cross-sectional

survey found an equally strong association between reading the Statement and opposing Measure 73.

For some, the bottom line is whether a process like the CIR will produce voter judgments *of a higher quality*. In an important sense, this cannot be known given the difficulty of establishing an independent political judgment in a pluralist society. Who would be the arbiter of whether one or another judgment is better or worse? If there existed such a philosopher queen (or king, granted), what would be the point in building democratic institutions?

Such philosophical questions aside, our research showed that the CIR can serve as an effective means of increasing the *accuracy* of voters' policy beliefs in initiative elections by increasing their knowledge of important facts about the policy in question. The CIR also increased the coherence of voters' values considerations by helping them to reflect on the more subtle values-implications of passing the proposed law.

These findings have implications that extend beyond abstract democratic theories. After the initial pilot of the CIR, the Oregon legislature passed and the governor signed in 2011 House Bill 2634, which established the Citizens' Initiative Review Commission and made the CIR a permanent institution. The CIR process has continued to run in Oregon in every even-numbered year since 2010. With CIR processes piloted in Arizona, Colorado, and Massachusetts in 2014-16 and legislation introduced in Washington (House bill 1364, 2015-16) and Massachusetts (House bill 368, 2017), this process could [spread to other states, or beyond the United States](#).

Whether applied to the US, the UK, the EU, or any other democratic polity, the CIR demonstrates the viability of institutional reforms that bridge large-scale political processes with intensive small group deliberation. For this reason, the CIR may inspire future minipublic designs that take even further this idea of linking micro- and macro- deliberation.

- *This article is based on the paper "[Assessing the electoral impact of the 2010 Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review](#)," co-authored with Katherine Knobloch, Justin Reedy, Mark Henkels, and Kathy Cramer in American Politics Research.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP–American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



**John Gastil** – *Penn State University*

John Gastil, professor in Communication Arts & Sciences and senior scholar, McCourtney Institute for Democracy, Penn State University.