

Submitter: Lee Richardson
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Joint Special Committee On Referendum Petition
2026-302
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1599

I strongly oppose SB 1599 and the attempt to move the referendum on chapter 1, Oregon Laws 2025 (special session), to the May 19, 2026 primary ballot.

This proposal is not about administrative efficiency. It is about manipulating turnout and compressing public scrutiny to secure a political outcome. When legislation is referred to the people through a referendum petition, the appropriate and traditional venue for that decision is the November general election. That is when the broadest cross-section of Oregonians participates. Moving this vote to a primary election undermines that principle.

Primary elections consistently have significantly lower turnout than general elections. That is not controversial; it is data. November elections draw the highest participation from independents, moderates, and occasional voters. Primary elections disproportionately reflect more partisan and highly engaged voters. If lawmakers truly believe in the merits of this policy, they should welcome the widest possible electorate—not seek to narrow it.

The referendum process exists as a constitutional check on legislative power. When citizens gather signatures to refer a bill, they are invoking one of the strongest tools of direct democracy available in Oregon. The Legislature should not respond by adjusting the timing in a way that changes the composition of the electorate. That erodes public trust.

Supporters may argue that moving the vote earlier provides certainty or expediency. But administrative convenience is not a sufficient justification to alter the democratic playing field. The public deserves adequate time for education, debate, fiscal analysis, and community discussion. A November ballot allows for a more thorough and transparent vetting of the issue.

There is also a fiscal consideration. Changing election timing can create avoidable administrative complexity and costs for counties already managing tight budgets. If this measure is significant enough to warrant a public vote, it is significant enough to be placed on the ballot with the highest participation and standard election infrastructure.

The perception problem alone should give pause. Even if proponents believe their motives are pure, shifting a referred measure to a lower-turnout election creates the

appearance of gamesmanship. Public confidence in government is fragile. Actions that appear designed to influence turnout rather than persuade voters only deepen cynicism.

If lawmakers are confident in the policy enacted during the 2025 special session, they should have no hesitation placing it before the full electorate in November 2026. Let every eligible voter have the maximum opportunity to participate. Let the debate unfold in the open, over time, with full transparency and accountability.

Democracy functions best when participation is maximized, not managed. The referendum process should not be strategically re-timed to advantage one side. It should be honored.

For these reasons, I urge you to reject SB 1599 and allow this referred measure to appear on the November 2026 general election ballot, where it belongs.

Oregonians deserve nothing less than a fair, transparent, and broadly participatory vote.