

Thoughts on the CIR From Afar

John Gastil, Penn State University

From afar, I have watched the progress of Senate Bill 755, which would stabilize funding for the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR). It is fitting that the bill was introduced by Senator Arnie Roblan, who sponsored the 2011 legislation that established the CIR Commission.

I follow these events "from afar" because I write from Penn State, where I have studied the CIR for a decade. Funds from the National Science Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the Kettering Foundation, and multiple public universities have made it possible for my colleagues and I to trace the CIR from its inception to the present day. Our findings might be useful to consider as Oregonians mull over Roblan's proposal.

Our research team has filled hundreds of pages with statistical details, but our main findings can be summarized concisely. The CIR panels deliberate effectively on complex ballot measures, and they manage to write one-page summaries that voters can understand. Most of those who read the CIR's Citizens' Statements find them helpful, and readers come away with a better understanding of the policy question on their ballot.

Impacts of the Citizens' Statement's vary by issue, but the effects on voter knowledge are reasonably consistent. Each year, we run a survey experiment in which we randomly assign voters to seeing either a Citizens' Statement, an official issue summary, or nothing at all. On a ten item True or False quiz, voters who read the Citizens' Statement show the best scores. Reading the Statement is often the difference between knowing the answer to half of the policy questions versus only a third.

Many voters respond to our factual questions by saying, "I don't know." Even when voters hazard a guess, they often say a factual statement is "probably" true or false. Though we didn't anticipate this finding, it turns out the Citizens' Statement's greatest power may be in bolstering the *confidence* voters have in what little accurate knowledge they already have. And when it comes to voting, *knowing* something is a lot more valuable than being able to guess correctly.

It is heartening to see how effectively the CIR cuts through partisan biases. A colleague from Iceland and I saw this in our latest study, which comes from a Jackson County, Oregon CIR on genetically modified seeds. That county's Citizens' Statement increased policy knowledge the most for those who had the most biased views. The Statement chastened environmentalists to avoid overstating the risks of genetic modification, and it prompted conservatives to recognize the potential benefit of government regulation.

Published reports aside, Oregon voters who have used the CIR already know its value. What's less obvious to the average Oregonian is what the CIR means to the larger world.

Democratic reformers across the globe refer to the *Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review*—or simply, the OCIR. Just as Oregon gets credit as an early adopter of the initiative process itself, so does it get credit for inventing the CIR. When I present my research across the US or overseas, I remind audiences that the CIR also has been tested in Arizona, California, Colorado, and Massachusetts. No matter. To them, it remains the *Oregon CIR*.

When I hear other researchers or civic leaders invoke this unique institution, they commonly use the Oregon CIR as an example of how a society can push back against misinformation and biased information processing. They argue that it cuts through the bureaucratic language of official voter guides by empowering voters to help each other think through tough issues.

These admirers of the Oregon CIR are surprised when I tell them that the state held no CIR in 2018. I explain that the CIR was established during a recession when state governments had to cut their budgets. In that context, it was remarkable that Oregon established any new commissions at all, whatever its expense.

While Oregon legislators ponder a bill to stabilize CIR funding, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is weighing the merits of House Bill 667, which would establish a CIR for its own statewide ballot questions. This east coast variant was modeled in every way on the Oregon process, save one: it would tap the General Fund to conduct its reviews.

Having conducted pilot tests in 2016 and 2018, Massachusetts is poised to become the first government to provide stable funding for a CIR process. Perhaps one day the Oregon CIR will come to be known as the Massachusetts CIR. With new tests being conducted in Finland and Switzerland in the coming year, and more to follow elsewhere, it is more likely to simply become "the CIR."

As a scholar of democratic innovation, however, I will always appreciate that Oregon was the first state to test the wisdom of this unique deliberative process. For me, it will always be the Oregon CIR.

John Gastil is a professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences and Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, where he is a senior scholar at the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. Google the "Citizens' Initiative Review Research Project" to see reports and articles on the CIR.