

## Why Oregon Voters Reject Moving SB 1599 to the ODOT Funding Vote from November to May

In early 2026, the Oregon Legislature considered **Senate Bill 1599 (SB 1599)** — a proposal to move the vote on a high-profile transportation funding referendum from the **November general election** to the **May primary election**. The referendum itself arose after opponents successfully gathered enough signatures to refer a controversial transportation law — including increased gas taxes, vehicle registration and title fee hikes, and a payroll tax expansion — to the ballot. SB 1599 changes the date on which voters would decide whether to uphold or overturn that law is strongly opposed! Oregon voters reject the shift to a May ballot for several reasons including turnout considerations, democratic fairness, political strategy, and broader skepticism of government timetables for major policy decisions.

At its core, the effort to move the vote on ODOT funding to May is seen by opponents as **a political maneuver rather than a neutral administrative change**. The transportation referendum had originally qualified for the **November 2026 general election** after organizers gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures demanding a traditional general election vote. When Democratic legislative leaders introduced SB 1599 to shift that vote to **May 19, 2026**, this move undermined the will of the people who wanted November when signing the referendum petition. Petitioners had specifically selected November as the time for voters to decide on the issue, and feel that date should be honored rather than altered by lawmakers.

One of the most serious reasons Oregon voters reject the idea is a **concern about voter turnout disparities between May primary and November general elections**. Historically, general elections — especially those tied to significant races such as gubernatorial or federal contests — draw **much higher turnout** than spring primaries. For instance, in the 2022 election year, turnout was approximately **67 %** during the November general election compared with only **37 %** in the May primary. These numbers reflect a broader dynamic: general elections typically engage a broader cross-section of the electorate, including independent and less-engaged voters, while primary elections often draw only the most politically active and **partisan** voters.

SB 1599 would seize on this turnout gap and moving the vote to May would **diminish democratic participation** and potentially skew the outcome toward more ideologically motivated voters. Important decisions about taxes and transportation funding — issues that affect all Oregonians — **should** happen when the largest possible number of voters are engaged. The perception that the legislature is attempting to suppress broader participation by restructuring the election timetable feeds into a sense of **democratic unfairness** and suspicion among the electorate.

There are also concerns about **ballot access under Oregon's closed primary system**. In May primaries, only **registered Republicans and Democrats receive full partisan ballots**, while non-affiliated voters — a significant portion of Oregon's electorate — receive shorter ballots that often omit key partisan races. This raises an additional concern: if the vote on the transportation funding measure were held in May, **non-affiliated voters might feel disenfranchised or less represented** in the process, because their participation could be limited in practice due to the way ballots are structured. This structural effect stokes opposition and distrust for the democratic voting process.

In addition to turnout and access concerns, many opponents feel the debate in terms of **political strategy and perceptions of “rigging” or manipulation**. Democratic leaders — who generally support the underlying transportation funding law — are attempting to avoid the political consequences of placing such an unpopular measure on the November ballot, where turnout would likely include more moderate and independent voters. Statements from prominent Republican figures believe the attempt to move the vote as **an effort to insulate Democrats from accountability**, especially in a year with competitive races such as the gubernatorial contest that will help to drive turnout.

Oregon voters feel like moving SB 1599 would “**rig the system**” and “**slip this past you,**” and see this as a move that legislative leaders are opting for prioritizing their political survival over honoring the terms of the citizens’ referendum. There is a genuine vein of skepticism among voters about perceived political manipulation and government responsiveness. There is widespread opposition to political maneuvering and the funding for the Oregon Department of Transportation in general.

Another dimension of resistance is a **broader hatred of substantial tax and fee increases** embedded in the underlying transportation funding law. Many voters who opposed the increased gas tax, higher title and registration fees, and expanded payroll tax see the proposed date change as a two-step attempt to force through a package they already opposed. Because the referendum itself effectively paused those increases pending voter approval, efforts to shift the date make opponents feel as though the legislature is trying to push through controversial fiscal measures on a less engaged electorate.

Underlying much of the opposition is a **commitment among Oregon voters to robust participation and civic engagement** in major policy decisions. Oregon has a long tradition of direct democracy through ballot measures and referendums, and many voters take pride in voting on tax and spending questions during high turnout general elections. To them, moving a consequential vote to an earlier and lower-participation election is perceived as eroding that tradition, weakening the voice of the electorate and diminishing the legitimacy of the decision. Even if voters agreed with parts of the policy debate about transportation funding, the procedural move is enough, in many minds, to reject the idea outright.

Finally, the opposition of SB 1599 should be seen as a sign of voter rejection to **politically motivated procedural changes**. Voters are increasingly weary of tactics that prioritize political calculation over transparent governance. Oregon’s polarized political environment needs elected officials to support the will of the voting public! Any effort to change how and when important decisions are made is partisanship, rather than pragmatic governance. **Reject the shift to May!!!** Voters have a clear message that they value open access and broad participation over legislative manipulation.

**Oregon voters will not stand for the move of the ODOT funding vote from November to May!!!** It would produce a less inclusive and less representative democratic process. Concerns about lower turnout, exclusion of non-affiliated voters, political manipulation, and less overall participation and understanding of a highly critical and unpopular bill. SB 1599