

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

Over 250,000 Oregonians, including myself, signed petitions to refer portions of Chapter 1, Oregon Laws 2025 (the gas tax hike, vehicle registration increases, payroll tax expansions, and other burdensome fees) to the voters. Those petition forms explicitly stated that the measure would appear on the **November general election ballot**, when voter turnout and participation are highest. Signers relied on that assurance when exercising our constitutional right to referendum under **Article IV, Section 1 of the Oregon Constitution**, which reserves these powers directly to the people—not to be undermined by legislative maneuvers.

SB 1599 represents an unprecedented and troubling attempt to override the clear expectations set during the signature-gathering process. Moving the vote to a lower-turnout primary election would:

- **Suppress voter participation** — General elections routinely see 70-80% turnout in Oregon, while primaries often hover around 30-50%. This change would disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of Oregonians who would otherwise weigh in on this deeply unpopular tax package, especially working families, rural residents, and those hit hardest by higher fuel and vehicle costs.
- **Limit informed decision-making** — An accelerated timeline squeezes the window for public education, media coverage, balanced arguments in the Voters' Pamphlet, and thorough scrutiny of the measure's impacts. Petition supporters and opponents alike need adequate time to make their case—something a rushed May vote undermines.
- **Appear politically motivated** — Critics, including referendum backers and legislative Republicans, have described this as an effort to improve the chances of the tax increases surviving by reducing turnout among likely opponents. This erodes trust in the democratic process and dismisses the will of the people who qualified the referendum in record time.

The Oregon Constitution protects the people's referendum power as a fundamental check on legislative overreach. Changing the election date after petitions were circulated and verified—based on the promised November date—sets a dangerous precedent. It risks making future initiative and referendum efforts seem futile if the Legislature can alter terms after the fact.

I urge the Committee to reject SB 1599 and allow Referendum Petition 2026-302 to proceed as originally scheduled on the November 2026 ballot. Let the people have their full voice on these significant tax increases at the election with the broadest participation.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I respectfully request that this bill not move forward.