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THE HEALTH CARE DEBATE

## Heeding the lessons of Measure 50's loss

**N**ow that Big Tobacco has ridden back out of town, let's clear the air and consider what really happened with Measure 50.

The most expensive ballot measure election in Oregon history manufactured significant public confusion about health care and cigarette taxes. So what statement did voters really make? And where do we go from here?

Certainly Measure 50's defeat was not a vote against health care for kids. But as a result of that defeat, 117,000 of Oregon's children will continue to lack essential medical coverage, leading to lives lost and families in financial crisis. Those uninsured kids are enough to fill up the Rose Garden Arena six times over.

No matter how you voted, Oregonians still largely agree that we need to provide health care for

those kids and that we also should help those addicted to cigarettes. So here are some lessons we can learn from this singular event in Oregon's history:

**Lesson 1:** Voters prefer to have taxes in statute, not in the constitution.

Forget that "tax" appears in the Oregon Constitution 334 times already and that Oregon voters have amended that document more than 200 times. We should be more selective about changing the constitution. Moreover, we should hold Oregon legislators accountable if they do not support tax changes in statute.

**Lesson 2:** Big Tobacco will spend large sums to ensure future profits.

Is it right that two companies from outside the state can spend millions to influence Oregon's vote? Polling on Measure 50 before the tobacco-financed ad campaign showed strong

public support for Measure 50, but that support dissolved once the deceptive advertisements began blanketing our airwaves.

From the perspective of the cigarette companies, \$12 million spent to defeat Measure 50 was a bargain compared with the \$100 million they would have lost in revenue each year. But from the perspective of Oregonians, our democracy was shaken as North Carolina companies sought to deceive us on the air and dictated the terms of the debate in our own election.

**Lesson 3:** The real benefits of a cigarette tax were obscured in the debate.

Why should we tax smoking? Because smoking kills people. One critical benefit of the proposed cigarette tax was that 22,000 adults would likely have quit smoking and another 32,000 youths would likely have forgone the habit be-

cause of increased prices. Measure 50 would have significantly benefited smokers because every cigarette not smoked means a longer life and less chance of being surprised by a heart attack at a young age or a cancerous growth in the lungs. Eight of 10 smokers want to quit, and taxes on cigarettes give them a nudge. Measure 50 would also have given them access to professional help to kick their habit. Smokers are among the big losers with the defeat of Measure 50.

Let's take these lessons to heart and move forward as a state to reduce the burden of smoking in Oregon and give our kids the health care they desperately need.

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IN MY OPINION