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Bubble-Up Democracy

All 50 states allow for some form of ballot measure or referendum, but only 24 states actually allow citizens to generate initiatives. This year, 53 of the 202 ballot measures were citizen-initiated. More states should consider the idea.

Indeed, such initiatives have been trending downward since their 1990s heyday (remember all the measures to set term limits on legislators?) That's because state lawmakers have been working overtime to make such initiatives more difficult to create.

Lawmakers, who have an inherent distrust of such measures ("You elected us, don't take our power away"), have been inclined to put extra effort into creating more restrictions on the citizen-initiative process. In Montana, and Oklahoma, lawmakers made sure such restrictive measures were on the ballot this year. The Oklahoma measure was defeated; Montana's passed. The courts, thankfully, have struck down similar citizen-blocking measures in Idaho and Utah, on First Amendment grounds.

Such grass-roots efforts can help reenergize voters and preserve an outlet for direct democracy if entrenched interests control a legislature. Research shows that when there's an initiative on the ballot, voter turnout increases 3 to 7 percent.

Some dangers do exist in citizen initiatives. If they pass, they might conflict with existing law, or be unworkable under current budgets. Still, they are a valuable tool more often than not as a bubble-up way of setting a public agenda when lawmakers fail.