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Lawmakers aren't listening to the voters on tax increases

By Jason Mercier

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It is time for state lawmakers to realize that six votes of approval for a supermajority on tax increases must be taken seriously.

HOW would you define a dynasty? Do the Seahawks and their three straight years in the playoffs, including back-to-back Super Bowl appearances, count? How about Gonzaga and its 17 straight NCAA basketball tournament invites?

Or perhaps a dynasty can be defined as winning six out of six times at the ballot box over the past two decades. If so, consider the voters' consistent call for a super-majority for tax increases as being a political dynasty, one which lawmakers in Olympia should finally acknowledge.

This month's passage of Initiative 1366 across the vast majority of the state represents the sixth time since 1993 voters have approved the policy of a supermajority restriction for tax increases. Voters did the same in 1993, 1998, 2007, 2010 and 2012.

With this month's approval of I-1366, voters have made it clear they want to add to the 20-plus supermajority restrictions already in Washington's constitution. These provisions have been placed there to require a higher vote threshold for certain government actions.

These restrictions are policy choices. Requiring a supermajority vote to increase the financial burden the state places on its citizens is no more undemocratic than the many other supermajority requirements that are already part of the state constitution.

Several of these provisions have been part of the Washington Constitution since statehood. The most recent supermajority restriction was added by lawmakers, and confirmed by voters, in 2007, with the requirement for a three-fifths legislative vote to spend funds from the budget-stabilization account.

The one component currently missing from the state constitution's fiscal supermajority requirements is additional protection for state taxpayers on tax increases. Ultimately, the Legislature should allow the voters to harmonize the existing budget supermajority vote requirements with a tax restriction to complement the current higher threshold required for local tax-levy increases, incurring debt and spending one-time savings.

If the Legislature ultimately decides to send voters a proposed constitutional amendment to require a supermajority vote to raise taxes, it would be following the lead of several other states. Seventeen states have some form of supermajority vote requirement for tax increases. Among the states with this taxpayer

protection in their constitutions are Oregon and California.

If supermajority vote requirements are truly incompatible with democracy and facilitate the “tyranny of the minority,” will those opposed to tax limitation try to repeal the other supermajority restrictions in the constitution? Will they work to do away with requirements for voter approval of taxes at the local level, such as property-tax levies, so that local lawmakers do not have to burden the people with trivial decisions like tax increases?

Washington’s constitution makes it very clear the people are the sovereigns of the state and not subjects of the political class. The real question is whether lawmakers will finally represent the will of the people or instead continue to ignore the clear and consistent message from those they are supposed to represent.

It is time for lawmakers in Olympia to realize that six votes of approval from the people must finally be taken seriously.

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