

A look at the nine amendments on Florida's ballot

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Howard Troxler, St. Pete Times

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Some people blame it on all those citizen petitions going around. That's why the Legislature has tried to crack down on petitions in recent years.

But wait. Of this year's nine amendments, only three were proposed by petition. Six were placed on the ballot by the Legislature itself.

Ready?

Amendment 1 repeals Florida's system of public financing for statewide elections, created in the 1980s and put in the Constitution by the voters in 1998. Candidates for governor and the state Cabinet got \$11.1 million in the last statewide cycle in 2006.

The original, reformist idea was to level the playing field against big money. But leaders of the Legislature call it "welfare for politicians." They have made it tougher to get the money in recent years, and now hope the voters will kill it altogether.

Amendment 2 gives an increased homestead tax exemption (meaning, they have to possess one already) to members of the military and reserves deployed outside the United States. The additional tax break would be based on the number of days of the year they were out of the country.

Amendment 3 contains two more tax ideas. It says that the tax appraisal on a nonhomestead property can't go up by more than 5 percent a year (it's 10 percent now).

It also creates a property-tax exemption for first-time home buyers of up to 25 percent of a home's value in the first year, which is then phased out over the next few years.

Amendment 4 is better known as "Hometown Democracy" and might be the fight of the year. Placed on the ballot by petition, it says voters should have final say over amendments to city and county "comprehensive plans," which control growth.

Amendments 5 and 6 also were put on the ballot by citizen petition. Their stated goal is "fair districts" for the Legislature and Congress, saying that districts should not be drawn by the Legislature to "favor or disfavor" one party or incumbent. Opponents say (among other things) that this is impossible to achieve and will automatically throw redistricting into the courts.

Amendment 7 is the Legislature's reply to Amendments 5 and 6. The claim is that it meant only to "clarify" the previous two amendments. Critics say it really wipes them out, because it declares that its own wording shall not be "subordinate" to any other part of the Constitution. A lawsuit has been filed seeking to throw Amendment 7 off the ballot as deceptive.

Amendment 8 is the Legislature's attempt to change the rules for public school class sizes in Florida that were approved by voters in 2002. The amendment would return to using schoolwide average class sizes instead of a strict per-classroom limit.

Amendment 9 is the Republican Legislature's answer to the health care bill passed by the Democratic Congress. The reason I called it a "futile gesture" is that it says that Floridians cannot be required to take part in "any health care system." But federal law remains the boss.

In terms of controversy, Amendment 4 will be the biggest, followed by the Amendment 5-6-7 districting battle. Some of my friends in Tallahassee tell me I'm dead wrong about calling Amendment 7 sneaky, so we'll explore that. Also look for some resistance to the Amendment 8 attempt to re-raise class sizes.

Amendment 1, the public-financing repeal, is going to need do-gooder opposition to get much attention. Nobody is going to oppose Amendment 2's tax break for the military. Local governments might complain about the tax breaks in Amendment 3, but voters have passed every tax break so far.

Plenty to talk about for the rest of the year, besides the whole Crist-Rubio-Meek-Greene-McCollum-Sink-Scott drama.