

By the Numbers: The Region Votes Its Fate

by Richard Clucas

Maps by Alton Straub

Planted in front of many of the homes stretching up SW Tower Way near Gabriel Park in the fall was a sight that was common throughout the metropolitan area. Sticking out of the ground were the blue and white lawn signs advocating the election of John Kerry for United States president. What was so striking about Tower, however, was not simply the presence of pro-Kerry signs, but just how many families along the short and winding street had planted them. In streets to the south and west, one could find Kerry signs, but Tower was blanketed with them, with home after home championing Kerry-Edwards. Tower, of course, was not the only street in the region blanketed with campaign signs. Other streets in other neighborhoods were similarly awash with pro-Kerry and pro-Bush signs.

The presence of so many signs on individual streets is fascinating because it tells us something about the people who live in those neighborhoods and their political values. Throughout most years, we rarely hear how our neighbors feel about particular political issues. But in election years as the campaigns intensify, the lawn signs emerge, providing us with clues about our neighbors' political beliefs and concerns. Part of the reason it is fascinating because there is something reassuring to know the values of others in our community, at least when they agree with our own views.

Counting lawn signs provides clues to public opinion, but it certainly isn't the most sophisticated approach. A better way to learn about our beliefs is to examine voting patterns at a local level. Election results provide a good sense of our values, and they offer a much better approach for studying political opinions than many other methods because they tell us where voters stand when they actually cast their ballots.

We examined how the residents in the five-county region of the metropolitan area (Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill) voted in the 2004 general election on selected ballot measures in order to understand the political values of the neighborhoods in which we live. Using geographic information systems (GIS), we mapped the distribution of votes by election precinct on what we thought were three of the most revealing measures: the constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages (Measure 36), the initiative requiring state and local governments to pay landowners when land-use restrictions reduce property value (Measure 37), and the constitutional amendment limiting non-economic damages in medical malpractice lawsuits (Measure 35). In general, the maps revealed what most political observers already know about the metropolitan area: there is a polarization of voters in the region, with the more urban areas tending to be more liberal than the rural ones, and with the suburbs falling somewhere in between. Yet the maps reveal that there are important differences from neighborhood to neighborhood, and that the polarization is not as strong on some issues.

Measure 36 was approved with 57 percent of the vote statewide. Figure 1 shows the distribution of votes by precinct across the metropolitan area. The most intense opposition to the measure came from the block of precincts in dark blue on the map. Almost all of these precincts are within a square area bounded by Killingsworth to the north, 82nd Avenue to the east, and the county line on the west and south. The sole precinct within that square supporting Measure 36 was precinct 4299 in the Brentwood-Darlington neighborhood along SE Flavel. The rest of the metropolitan region was more supportive of the amendment. The only precincts in the other coun-

MEASURE 36: Same-Sex Marriage
(Oregon: Yes 57%, No 43%)

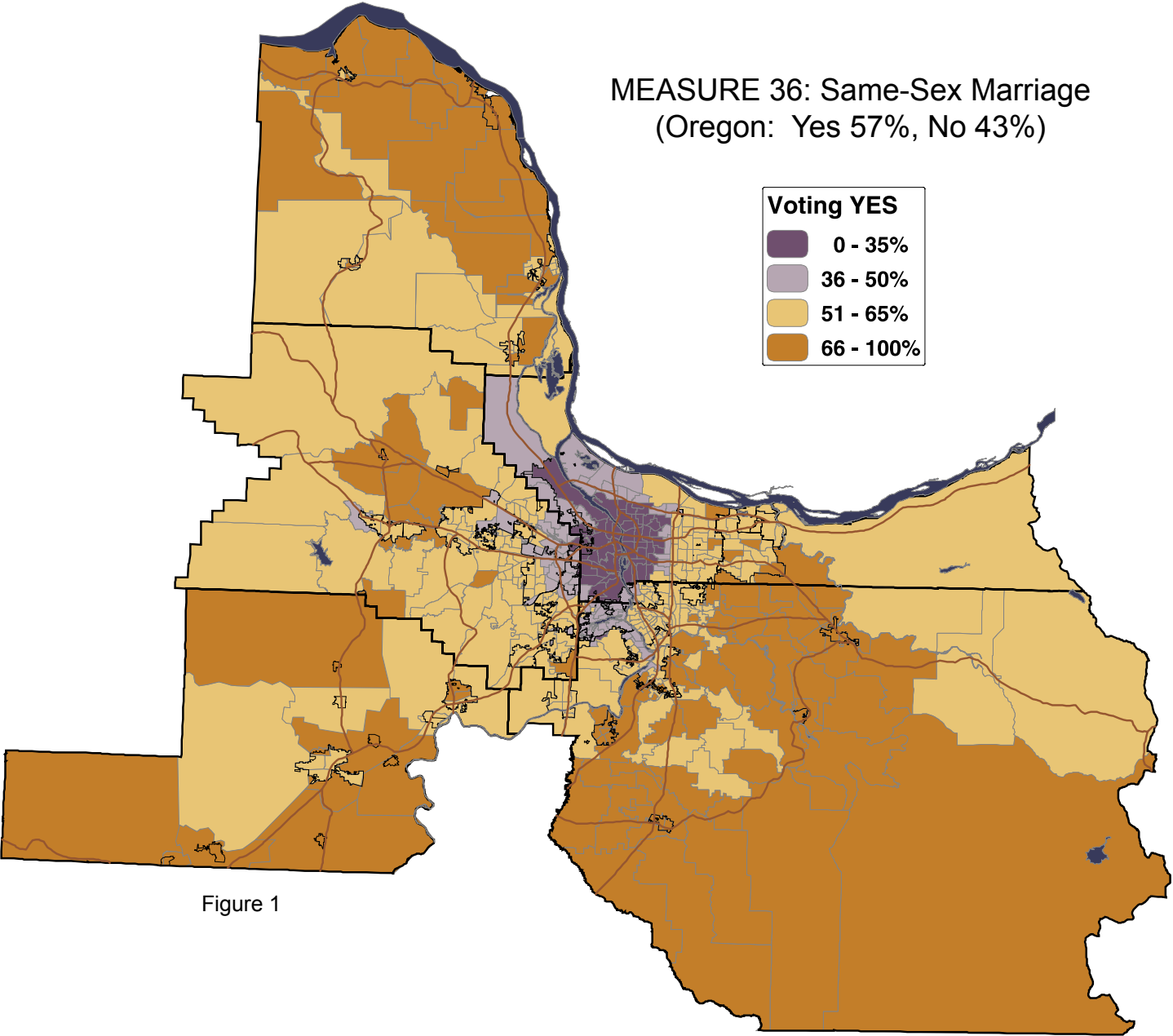


Figure 1

Sources: Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

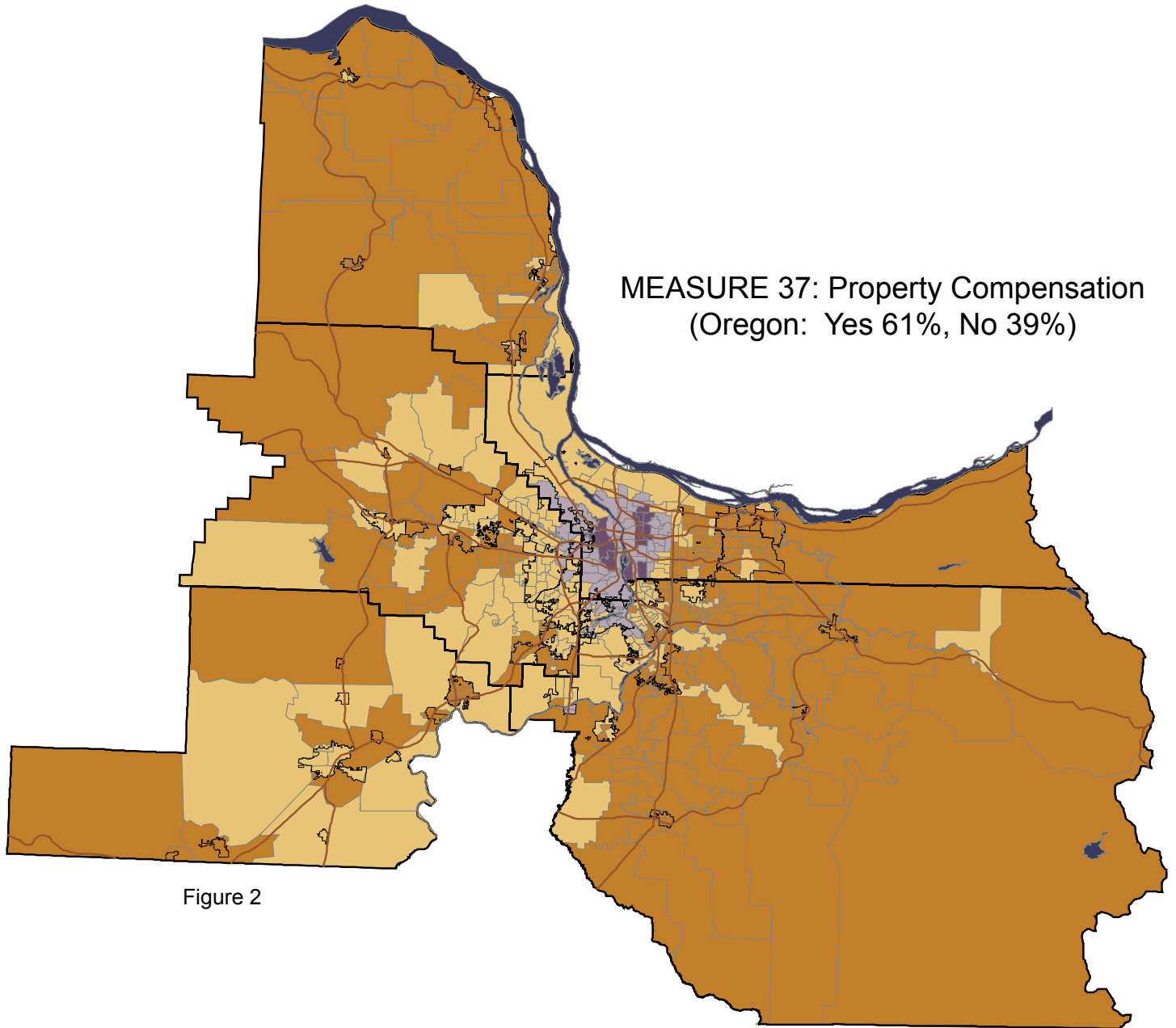


Figure 2

Sources: Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

ties that opposed the measure were those in Clackamas and Washington clustered near the Multnomah County line, with a few scattered exceptions a little further away. The broadest level of support for Measure 36 came primarily from the more rural areas in southeast Clackamas, northern Columbia, and Yamhill counties. In fact, Measure 36 won in all of the precincts in both Columbia and Yamhill counties.

The pattern of precinct voting was similar on Measure 37 (figure 2), though the measure received more support overall. The precincts in which the measure faced the greatest opposition were again within the same square in Multnomah County, though the patches of dark blue are smaller. The strongest opposition was in the precincts bounded by NE Prescott Street at the north, 39th Avenue on the east, Division on the south, and 20th Avenue on the west. As one

moves away from this central block, support for the measure grows, especially in the more rural areas.

The voting pattern on several other ballot measures was similar, though we have not included the maps. For example, the strongest support for Measure 34, restricting timber harvesting in the Tillamook and Clatsop state forests, came from precincts within that same square of Multnomah County. As one moved away from the center, support declined, with almost all the outlying precincts voting overwhelmingly in opposition. The strongest support for Measure 33, the Medical Marijuana bill, also came from that same urban square, though the most supportive precincts were slightly to the west of the main block of precincts opposing Measure 37. Again, the vote becomes reversed the farther one moves away from the urban area.

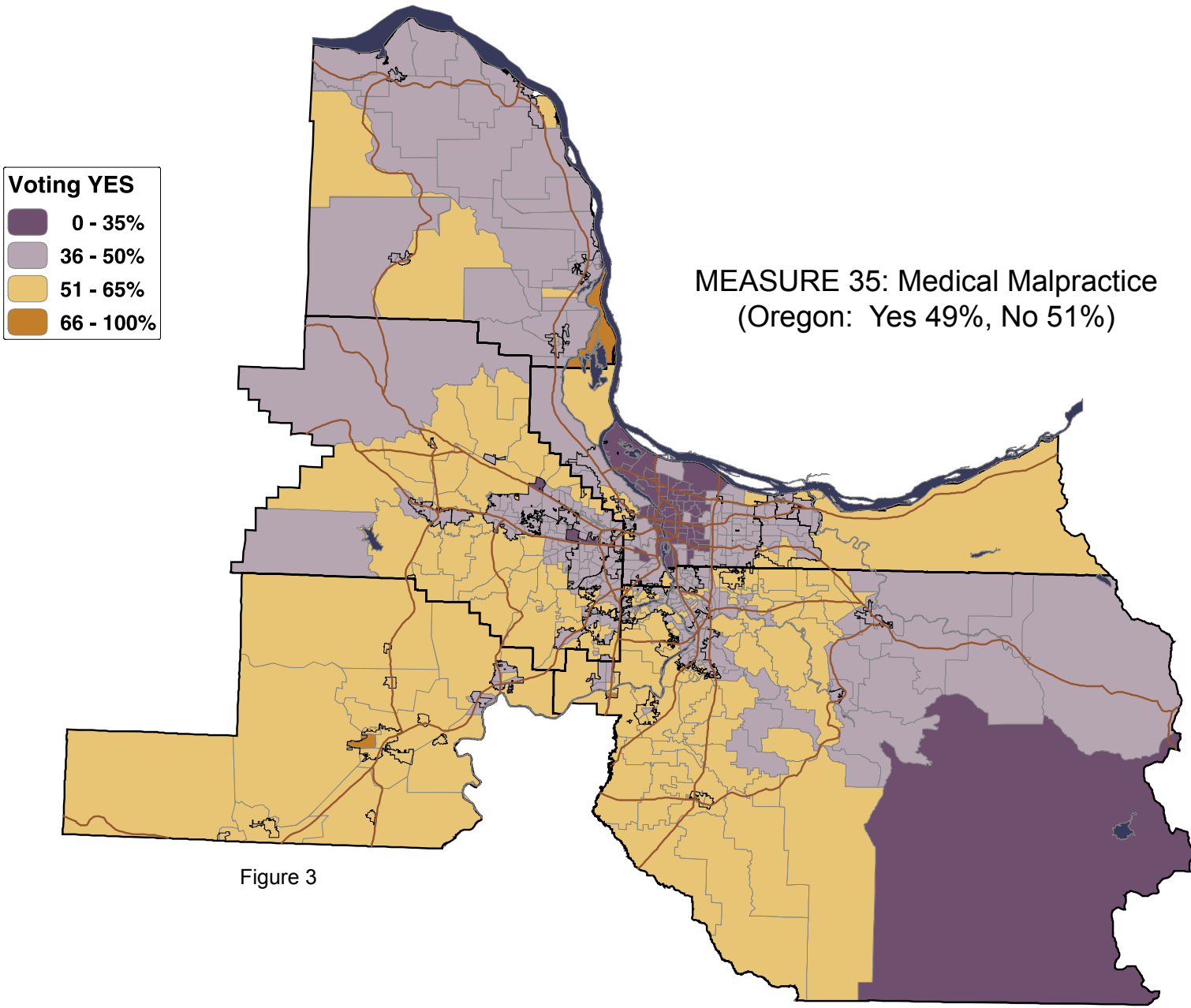


Figure 3

Sources: Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

Measure 35, however, tells a slightly different story, one in which the conflict is not nearly so defined by the split between urban and rural voters (figure 3). To be sure, the vote in several of the urban precincts was again overwhelmingly one-sided in opposition. Yet other aspects of the vote pattern were different. One major difference is that measure just did not enjoy overwhelming support anywhere. In fact, there were fewer than 20 precincts throughout the entire five-county region in which more than 60 percent of the voters supported the measure. In addition, some of the more rural areas joined with the urban center to oppose the caps.

The lesson from these maps is that there are some fairly consistent voting patterns across different issues in our community, with the region affected by a strong urban-rural divide. This pattern is particularly apparent on moral and economic issues, such

as gay marriage, land-use, and forest preservation. Even though the proposal to cap medical malpractice awards is an important political issue, particularly among doctors and lawyers, it does not produce the same regional polarization. Why not? The answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that it does not easily fall within the traditional conservative-liberal lines that divide the state and region, forcing our neighbors to wrestle with the issue on less ideological grounds.

M Richard Clucas is a professor of political science at the Mark Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University.

Alton Straub is a doctoral candidate in environmental science at Portland State University.