WASHINGTON

Secretary of State

2026 Initiative & Referenda Handbook

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Introduction

In 1912, Washington became one of the first states to adopt the initiative and referenda process, thus securing the rights of citizens to make and remake their laws, and to provide a check over the decisions of their Legislature.

Today, if Washingtonians are dissatisfied with certain laws or feel new laws are needed, they can petition to place proposed legislation on the ballot. The process is termed "**Initiative**" because the electorate can initiate legislation. The electorate can either place a proposition directly on the ballot or it can submit the proposed law to the Legislature at the regular legislative session allowing the elected representatives an opportunity to enact the proposed legislation themselves instead of placing the measure on the ballot.

A **Referenda** allows citizens, through the petition process, to refer acts of the Legislature to the ballot before they become law. The Referenda also permits the Legislature itself to refer proposed legislation to the electorate for approval or rejection.

The Initiative and Referenda processes guarantee Washington's electorate the right to legislate. Sponsors of Initiative or Referenda measures must obtain a substantial number of petition signatures from registered voters in order to certify their measures to the ballot or to the Legislature.

Washington's history has shown the Initiative and Referenda processes to be effective in protecting the people's interests. In fact, many of our most significant laws, such as our public disclosure laws, were enacted by this process.

Initiatives

The initiative process is the direct power of the voters to enact new laws or change existing laws. It allows the voters to place proposed legislation on the ballot. An initiative cannot be used to amend the State Constitution. (Article XXIII – Amendments).

There are two types of Initiatives:

Initiatives to the People are submitted for a direct vote of the people. If enough valid petition signatures are submitted, the measure will appear in the next state general election ballot in November.

Initiatives to the Legislature are submitted to the Legislature at its regular session each January, if enough valid petition signatures are submitted. Once the initiative is submitted to the Legislature, they must take one of the following three actions:

- The Legislature may adopt the Initiative as proposed, and it becomes law without a vote of the people;
- The Legislature may reject or refuse to act on the proposed Initiative and the Initiative will then be placed on the ballot at the next state general election; or
- The Legislature may propose a different measure dealing with the same subject and both measures will be placed on the next state general election ballot.

Who Can Propose an Initiative?

Any registered voter of Washington State, acting individually or on behalf of an organization, may propose legislation to create a new state law or to amend or repeal an existing state law.

When to File

Initiatives to the People

- Filing starts 10 months before the state general election with signature petition sheets due four months before the state general election.

Initiatives to the Legislature

- Filing starts 10 months before the start of the next state legislative session with signatures due 10 days before the state legislative session starts.

Referenda

The primary purpose of the Referenda is to give voters an opportunity to approve or reject laws either proposed or enacted by the Legislature in the last legislative session.

Sections of enacted laws with an emergency clause—those that are necessary for the immediate preservation of the public peace, health or safety, and the support of state government and its existing institutions—are exempt from the referenda process.

There are two types of Referenda:

Referenda Measures

Referenda Measures are filed by a registered voter (the Sponsor) on laws or acts recently passed by the State Legislature and placed on the ballot by a Referenda petition. A referendum may be filed on all or part of the law or act.

Referenda Bills

Referenda Bills are proposed laws referred to the voters by the State Legislature.

Who Can Propose a Referenda Measure?

Any registered voter of Washington State, acting individually or on behalf of an organization, may by petition, demand a law passed by the Legislature be referred to the voters prior to going into effect (except sections with emergency clauses, which are exempt from the referenda processes).

When Can a Referenda Be Filed?

Referenda signature petition sheets must be filed no later than 90 days after the final adjournment of the legislative session at which the act or law at issue was passed. The Referenda is then submitted at the next state general election.

2026 Filing Periods
Initiatives to the People: January 5, 2026, to July 2, 2026
Initiatives to the Legislature: March 11, 2026, to December 31, 2026
Referenda: March 12, 2026, to June 10, 2026 *Not later than 90 days after final adjournment of the session in which the measure passed.

**These dates refer to fulfilling all required filings including the submission of the required signatures necessary for a referendum to be certified.*

How to File

Filling a Proposed Initiative or Referenda Measure

Filings are made through the Secretary of States Elections online filing portal system. All correspondence from the Code Reviser, Attorney General and the Office of the Secretary of State is sent directly to the Sponsor's email address and to the Sponsor's filing portal account. To start the filing process, go to: https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives-referenda/filing-initiative to create a Sponsor filing account.

The Sponsors must:

- Create a Sponsor account in the filing portal (multiple initiatives and referenda may be filed under one sponsor account).
- When you create a filing, the Sponsor will need to upload their signed affidavit in PDF format for the proposed Initiative or referenda. The Sponsor can add co-sponsors to the filing, but it is not required to have co-sponsors. A copy of the co-sponsor's signed affidavit in PDF formatting will be required as well and be aware that electronic signatures are not allowed on affidavits.
- Upload the full text of the Initiative or a copy of the bill/act the referenda will be on, all in PDF format.
- Pay the filing fee ($156.00) with either a Visa or MasterCard online with the rest of your filing or by submitting a check by mail or cash in person. (**WAC 434-379-005**)

If you need to pay with a check, you can mail your payment to:

Office of the Secretary of State
Elections Division - Initiative Support
PO Box 40229
Olympia WA 98504-0237

If you need to pay cash in person, you would do so at the OSOS main office at:

The Secretary of States Office
416 Sid Snyder Ave SW
Olympia, WA

Note: *To become a sponsor of an initiative or referenda you must be registered to vote in our state (RCW 29A.72.010) and your filing will not be processed until our office receives your signed affidavit, the text of your initiative or referenda and your filing fee.*

Your Public Information and Public Disclosure

Register with the Public Disclosure Commission (PDC)

Voters approved Washington State's Public Disclosure Law in 1972. This act authorizes the PDC to administer the law and to develop rules and regulations to implement the laws related to campaign finance.

Requirements under this law stipulate that any person, organization, or committee which expects to receive funds or make expenditures in an effort to support or oppose any Initiative or Referenda must register with the PDC.

Sponsors of Initiatives and Referenda must register with the PDC and file a "Statement of Organization" (RCW 42.17A.205). Sponsors of and Initiative or Referenda are also required to file C1, C3 and C4 reports with the PDC if they accept contributions to support their initiative, or if they raise or spend more than $5,000 on the initiative campaign or accept more than $500 from one donor in support of your initiative. For more information see: https://www.pdc.wa.gov/

Public Information

Sponsors should be aware their voter registration information will appear on the Office of the Secretary of State's website (https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections) unless other public contact information is provided on the Sponsor's affidavit. Lists of Initiative and Referenda filings along with their Sponsor's contact information is posted on the Office of the Secretary of State's web site and are routinely made available to the public, the news media, and others.

Processing an Initiative

Once the Sponsor files an Initiative with the office of the Secretary of State and the affidavit and filing fee payment have been confirmed, we will send a copy of the initial text to the office of the Code Reviser for review.

The Code Reviser has seven (7) working days, to perform the following:

• Review the draft of the text for technical errors and style;

• Advise the Sponsor of any potential conflicts between the proposal and existing laws, and;

• Return the proposal to the Sponsor with recommended changes and the Certificate of Review. All changes suggested by the Code Reviser are advisory and are subject to approval or dismissal by the Sponsor.

Submitting the Final Text

The Sponsor has fifteen (15) working days from the initial filing date to file the final text of their proposed initiative measure to the Office of the Secretary of State (**RCW 29A.72.020**) done through the online system. The final text of their proposed initiative measure must be accompanied by the Code Reviser's Certificate of Review. It is the Sponsors responsibility to ensure the final text of their measure is complete with all necessary changes or edits before filing. Once the final text is submitted, the Sponsor can make no more changes to their proposed initiative measure.

Once the Office of the Secretary of State receives the final text of a proposed Initiative, the Office of the Secretary of State will assign a serial number to the Initiative and forward the Code Reviser's Certificate of Review and the final text of the Initiative to the office of the Attorney General for formulation of the Ballot Title and Summary.

Processing a Referenda

Referenda do not go through a Code Reviser review. For a Referenda, the only text summitted is a copy of the bill or act the Referenda is on, submitted at the time of initial filing. It is the Sponsor's responsibility to ensure the text of the bill or act the Referenda is on, matchs the text of the final version the Legislature voted on and signed by the Governor, or the Referenda will not be approved.

Once the Office of the Secretary of State receives and confirms the affidavit and filing fee payment of the Referenda, the Office of the Secretary of State will assign a serial number to the Referenda and forward the text of the Referenda to the office of the Attorney General for formulation of the Ballot Title and Summary.

Assignment of Ballot Title and Summary

Upon receipt of the final text of an Initiative or the text of the bill or act the Referenda is on, the Attorney General has five (5) working days to formulate and return the ballot title and summary to the Office of the Secretary of State and Sponsor. (**RCW** 29A.72.060)

The Ballot Title will consist of three parts:

Part I. A statement of the subject of the petition that is:

- No more than 10 words.
- Sufficiently precise to give notice of the measure's subject matter.
- Sufficiently broad to reflect the subject of the measure.

Part II. A concise description of the measure that is:

- No more than 30 words.
- A true and impartial description of the measure's essential content.
- Phrased to clearly identify the proposition to be voted on.
- Without prejudice for or against the measure.

Part III. A question in the format prescribed in RCW 29A.72.050

Ballot Measure Summary

The ballot measure summary written by the Attorney General's Office will summarize the Initiative or Referenda and will not be more than 75 words. Immediately after receiving the ballot title and summary, the Office of the Secretary of State will post it on our Elections website under "Current Initiatives & Referenda".

Appellate Period & Court Challenge

Any person dissatisfied with either the ballot title or summary prepared by the Attorney General's office may file a challenge by petitioning the Thurston County Superior Court in Olympia. The challenge must be filed during the appellate period, within five (5) working days of the Attorney General's office submission of the ballot title and summary to the Office of the Secretary of State, which is published to the SOS Elections website https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections . The court is required to give priority to such challenges and render a decision within five (5) days. The decision of the court is final.

Petition Sheet Requirments

The Sponsor of an Initiative or Referenda measure is responsible for printing signature petition sheets at their own expense and can be done so after the ballot title and summary is issued by the Attorney General's Office and the appellate period is over. The Office of the Secretary of State may reject any petition that does not meet the statutory requirements of **RCW 29A.72.170** and **WAC** 434-379-008.

State law requires:

- Petitions must be printed on sheets of good quality paper.
- Petition sheets must not measure less than 11 inches in width and not less than 14 inches in length. (We recommend 11in x 17in)
- Petition sheets submitted must all be the same size and format.
- The following items must be printed on the front of each petition sheet:
  1. The official ballot title and summary as prepared by the Attorney General's office;
  2. The serial number assigned by the Office of the Secretary of State;
  3. The heading specified by **RCW 29A.72.110** for Petitions to the Legislature, **RCW 29A.72.120** for Petitions to the People, or **RCW 29A.72.130** for Referenda Petitions;
  4. Not more than 20 numbered lines, each with space for a voter's signature, his/her printed name and the address, city, and county at which they are registered to vote; and
  5. The following warning, which must occupy not less than four (4) square inches:

     "Every person who signs this petition with any other than his or her true name, knowingly signs more than one of these petitions, signs this petition when he or she is not a legal voter or makes any false statement on this petition may be punished by fine or imprisonment or both."
  6. The following items must be printed on the back of each petition sheet.
     a. The full text of the measure.
     b. The following declaration by the signature gatherer as required by **RCW 29A.72.110**, **RCW 29A.72.120** or **RCW 29A.72.130** must be on the reverse side of every petition page.

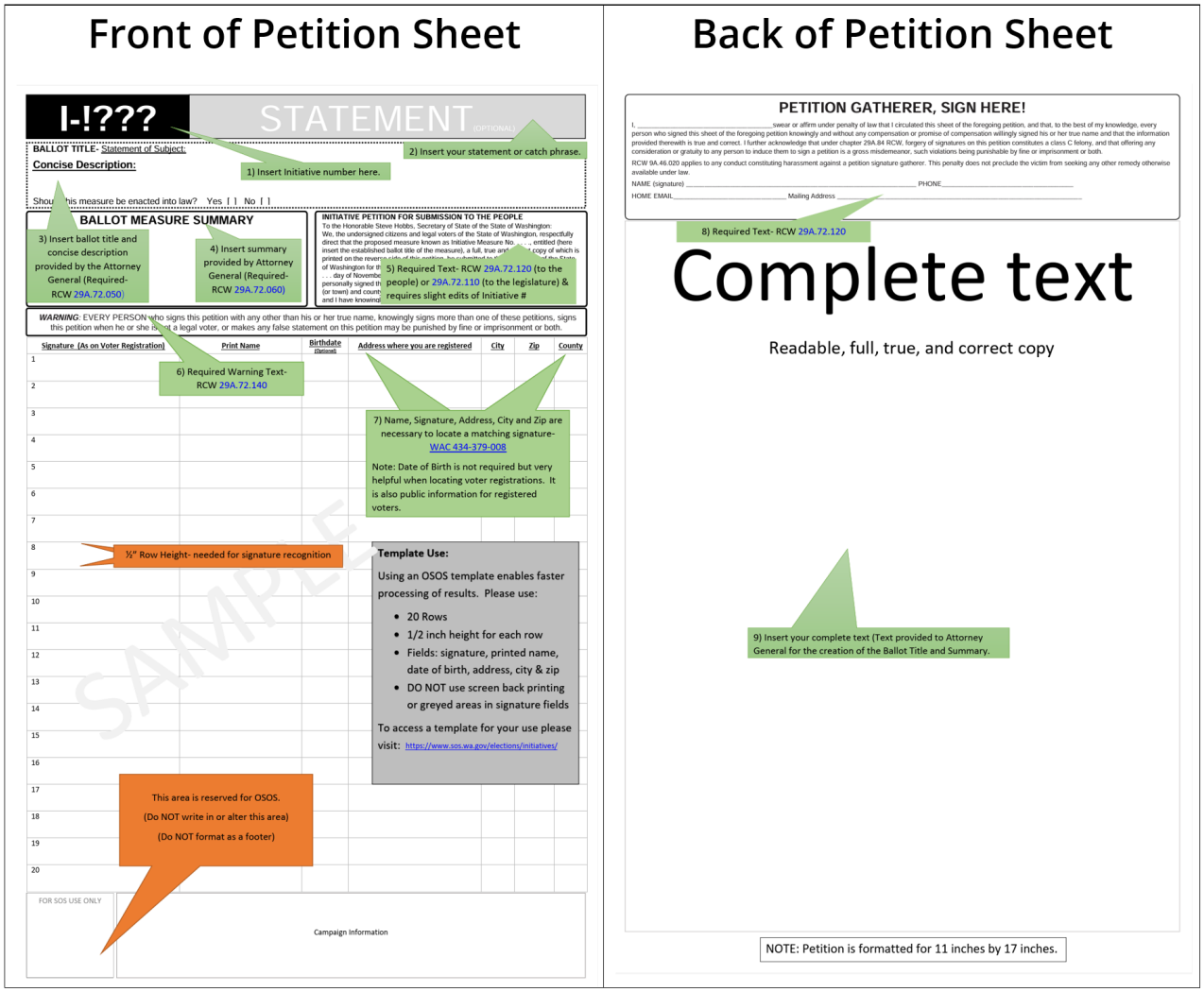
"I,____, swear or affirm under penalty of law that I circulated this sheet of the foregoing petition, and that, to the best of my knowledge, every person who signed this sheet of the foregoing petition knowingly and without any compensation or promise of compensation willingly signed his or her true name and that the information provided therewith is true and correct. I further acknowledge that under chapter 29A.84 ***RCW****, forgery of signatures on this petition constitutes a class C felony, and that offering any consideration or gratuity to any person to induce them to sign a petition is a gross misdemeanor, such violations being punishable by fine or imprisonment or both."*

Note: If the text of the measure is too long to fit all of it on the back of the petition sheet, you can print your petition sheet on one large sheet that is then folded like a newspaper to accommodate the text of the measure. Stapling extra sheets to the petition sheet is not allowed (**RCW 29A.72.100**).

Example Petition Sheet Templates and Instructions

Below you will find an example petition template with instructions. Example Petition Sheets Templates and instructions can be found at:

https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections



Circulation of Petition Sheets

Sponsors must notify the Office of the Secretary of State when signatures are being collected at least three months prior to the submission deadline. This allows the Office of the Secretary of State time to prepare sufficient staffing and supplies. Sponsors must also provide a sample template of the petition (in Word format) before the petitions are submitted (WAC 434-379-009). State law prescribes certain rules for collecting signatures. Failure by signature gatherers and/or signers to adhere to these rules can result in criminal prosecution.

Any person soliciting signatures should be fully aware of the following petition requirements:

- Only legally registered Washington voters are legally allowed to sign a petition.
- Signers should record, on the line with their signatures, the address at which they are registered to vote.
- Signers should print their names in the space provided to facilitate the validation of their signature.

Signature Requirements of Initiatives and Referenda Measures

The Washington State Constitution requires Initiative and Referenda measures to contain a specified number of legal voter signatures to be certified for either the ballot or the Legislature. Those specified numbers are as follows:

• **Initiatives** – Petitions must include a number of legal voter signatures equal to or in excess of eight (8) percent of the total votes cast for the office of Governor at the last regular state gubernatorial election.

• **Referenda Measures** – Petitions must include a number of legal voter signatures equal to or in excess of four (4) percent of the total votes cast for the office of Governor at the last regular state gubernatorial election. (Half the number of required signatures for an initiative.) ***NOTE:*** *a percentage of petition signatures are normally found to be invalid due to duplication, nonregistration, or fraud, it is recommended that sponsors file as many signatures as possible. While no number of signatures can guarantee sufficiency, an additional 20% - 25% "cushion" may prove sufficient to qualify the measure for the ballot, assuming the petition has a normal rate of invalidation.*

Initiative Petition Signatures Required + 25% cushion = 386,000
Referenda Petition Signatures Required + 25% cushion = 193,000

Submitting Initiative and Referenda Petition Sheets

An appointment to submit petitions sheets can only be made by the Sponsor of the Initiative or Referenda once the minimum required signatures have been collected. The appointment to submit petition sheets must be made at least two days in advance of your desired drop-off day with the Office of the Secretary of State (WAC 434-379-009). Scheduling at least two to three weeks in advance of submitting petition sheets is preferred so we can insure we have enough staff and supplies on hand.

All signed petition sheets must be returned by those collecting signatures to the Sponsor of the Initiative or Referenda before the Sponsor's drop-off appointment with the Office of the Secretary of State. Once the petition sheets are accepted and filed, additional petition sheets may be submitted by the Sponsor until the applicable deadline established by RCW 29A.72.160.

At the drop-off appointment, the staff will count the boxes of sheets of petitions and give the Sponsor a receipt for them. The petition sheets must clearly contain the minimum number of legal voter signatures needed for certification in order for the Office of the Secretary of State to accept the Initiative measure or Referenda petition for signature checking.

- **The Office of the Secretary of State may reject petitions short of the minimum requirements.**
- **The Office of the Secretary of State may reject any petition not in the legally required form.**

Note: Petitions that are submitted should be unfolded with any staples, rubber bands, sticky-notes, clips, and any other objects removed from the petition sheets and organized by size (if there are different size petition sheets).

Petitions must be submitted **in person by the Sponsor** by the close of business (5:00 pm) no later then the last business day in the specified period for submission of signatures. Please contact the office of the Secretary of State Elections division, 360-902-4180, 800-448-4881 or InitiativeSupport@sos.wa.gov to make your appointment and get directions for where and when to drop-off.

Note: *If a deadline falls on a Saturday, the office will be open on that Saturday for the transaction of business from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. If a deadline falls on an observed public holiday the deadline will be the previous business day (if not also a Saturday).*

The sponsor may appeal the Office of the Secretary of State's rejection of an Initiative or Referenda petition by filing an action with the Thurston County Superior Court within ten days of the rejection.

Fiscal Impact Statement

Upon the Sponsor making an appointment to submit signatures, the Office of the Secretary of State notifies the Office of Financial Management to create a "Fiscal Impact Statement" that will describe any projected increase or decrease in revenues, costs, expenditures, or indebtedness that the state or local governments will experience if the ballot measure were approved by state voters. (**RCW** 29A.72.025).

The Statement for fiscal impacts is issued to the Sponsor by the Secretary of State and posted online on the OSOS website. Any challenge to the fiscal impact statement must be done within 3 days of the Sponsor receiving the Statement from the Secretary of State, in the Thurston County Superior Court. (Sec. 6, chapter 29A.72 RCW)

Validating Petition Signatures

Once the petition signatures are dropped off, the Office of the Secretary of State checks petitions for duplicate signatures and the signers' status as a legal Washington voter. Petition checkers are trained by the Washington State Patrol to verify signatures (**RCW** 29A.40.110 (3) & WAC 434-379-020). Only one signature per voter counts.

State law allows that the Office of the Secretary of State may check a random sample of signatures. The random sample process may only be used when the number of signatures submitted is substantially in excess of the minimum needed to validate the measure. Random sampling is used to project the proportion of invalid signatures on the initiative or referenda petitions. (WAC 434-379-010)

If the random sampling indicates the number of valid signatures is equal to or in excess of the minimum needed, the measure is certified.

If the random sampling indicates the number of valid signatures is less than the number required, the Secretary of State will proceed to verify each signature not checked during the sampling process. (The random sample process may not be used to reject an initiative or referenda.)

Any citizen may appeal the Office of the Secretary of State's final determination of the number of valid signatures by applying to the Thurston County Superior Court within five days of the initial determination.

Both proponents and opponents of a measure may have designated observers present during the check of signatures. The Office of the Secretary of State has the authority to establish rules of conduct for observers and may limit the number of observers if necessary. (RCW 29A.72.230). The Observer handbook and training video can be found on our website here: https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives-referenda/petition-observer-resources

Certification of Initiative and Referenda Measures

For **Initiatives to the Legislature**, a certified copy of the initiative ballot title and summary is transmitted to the Legislature as soon as it convenes its regular session. The Office of the Secretary of State then notifies the Legislature of the results of the signature verification process once it has been completed. If sufficient valid signatures are validated, the Legislature must take one of the following three actions:

- The Legislature may adopt the Initiative as proposed, and it becomes law without a vote of the people;
- The Legislature may reject or refuse to act on the proposed Initiative and the Initiative will then be placed on the ballot at the next state general election; or
- The Legislature may propose a different measure dealing with the same subject and both measures will be placed on the next state general election ballot.

If sufficient valid signatures are validated on an **Initiative to the People or a Referenda**, certification containing the measure's serial number and title is transmitted to each county for placement on the next state general election ballot.

Filing Checklist

Are you ready to file?

- You are registered to vote in the State of Washington
- You have a scanned copy (in PDF format) of your signed affidavit(s)
- You have the complete text of the Initiative or Referenda measure (in PDF format)
- You are ready to submit the filing fee (Visa or MasterCard accepted)

This checklist is designed to assist sponsors with the Initiative and Referenda process

1. Create a sponsor's online Initiative filing account on the Office of the Secretary of State Elections website: https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives-referenda/filing-initiative
2. File your preliminary text (Initiatives) or for Referenda, file a copy of the bill or act you want your Referenda on, your signed affidavit of sponsorship, and pay the filing fee on the Office of the Secretary of State Petition Portal.
3. Register and file a "Statement of Organization" with the Public Disclosure Commission www.pdc.wa.gov after you file your Initiative or Referenda measure with the Office of the Secretary of State.
4. For Initiative filings only: Submit the final text of the Initiative along with the "Certificate of Review" you received from the Code Reviser, with the Office of the Secretary of State, within 15 working days of initial filing.
5. After the Attorney General's office submits the Ballot Title and Summary for your proposed Initiative or Referenda measure, and after the 5-day appellate period has passed, if no one has submitted a court challenge to the ballot title and/or summary, you can submit your petition sheet template to initiativesupport@sos.wa.gov and print your petition sheets.
6. Circulate you petition among voters to collect signatures.
7. Make your appointment for submitting petition signatures (only after collecting the minimum number of required signatures).
8. Submit your petition sheets with the Elections division of the Office of the Secretary of State.
9. If your Initiative or Referenda gets certified to the ballot, you as the sponsor will submit the "For" statement for the Voters' Pamphlet - see Guidelines for Ballot Measures.

Frequently Asked Questions

The Washington State Constitution reserves to the people the right to approve or reject certain state laws through the Initiative or Referenda process. A registered voter, or group of voters, desiring to qualify an Initiative or Referenda for the ballot must gather signatures on petitions in order to do so.

The Office of the Secretary of State is frequently asked about issues specifically related to the circulation of petitions and signature gathering. The following questions and answers are designed to summarize these issues.

What if I'm against an Initiative or Referenda? Do I have the right to urge people not to sign a petition?

> **Yes**, as a matter of freedom of speech. Please be aware of the applicable laws regarding petition gathering.
>
> This principle works both ways, of course. Neither side of an Initiative or Referenda campaign has the right to prevent the other from expressing opinions.

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If I am asked to sign a petition, am I entitled to read the petition or the proposed measure before I make up my mind?

> **Yes**. State law requires that petitions contain certain information, including the full text of the measure. This includes a ballot title and summary, written by either the Attorney General or a Superior Court judge, and other required information. The full text is printed on the back of the petition. Sometimes petition circulators attach the petitions to clip boards in order to make them easier to sign or easier for the circulator to handle. You should feel free to read any part of the petition that you think is necessary in order for you to come to a decision on signing or not signing the petition, even if that means unfolding it or removing it from a clipboard.

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What are the rules regarding the collecting of signatures at shopping malls, retail stores, etc.?

Gathering signatures for ballot measure petitions is a constitutionally guaranteed practice in the State of Washington. However, the right does not extend to all commercial private property open to the public. For further information on this subject, you may wish to have your legal counsel review the principal Washington court decisions on the subject:

- Fred Meyer Stores, INC v. Citizen Solutions, INC (2011)
- Fred Meyer Stores, INC v. National Petition Management, INC (2010)
- Initiative 172 v. Western Washington Fair Association (1997)
- Waremart Inc. v. Progressive Campaigns, Inc (1999)
- Southcenter Joint Venture v. National Democratic Policy Committee (1989)
- Alderwood Associates v. Washington Environmental Council (1981)

The courts' decisions depended on several factors, but the most important factor was whether the business in question had a policy of permitting or welcoming non-commercial, community or political activities onto the property. The courts have characterized this as maintaining a policy of allowing charitable, civic and political groups to use designated "public service centers" on the property.

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What role does the Office of the Secretary of State play in resolving these disputes?

None. Disagreements between property owners and signature gatherers are civil disputes that can only be resolved by the courts. We urge aggrieved parties to consult their own attorneys, and we make clear any redress is a matter for the courts to decide.

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Does the signature gatherer need to sign the declaration on the back of the petition?

No. Due to an opinion published by the Attorney General's office in 2006, the Office of the Secretary of State does not require that the signature gatherer sign the declaration in order for the petition to be accepted. For more information, see AGO 2006 No. 13.

Assistance and Contact Information

This manual is designed to inform citizens about the initiative and referenda processes and to serve as a basic road map to those who wish to exercise these important constitutional rights. We recommend working with your own attorney to make sure you follow all applicable laws and procedures as you go through the initiative and referenda process.

Further questions or requests should be directed to:

Initiative Support
Office of the Secretary of State
Elections Division
PO Box 40229
Olympia WA 98504-0237
Phone: (360) 902-4180
Email: InitiativeSupport@sos.wa.gov
Website: https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections