



How To Circulate Initiative and Referendum Petitions: Washington

BY RICHARD P. BURKE

INITIATIVES AND REFERENDA

Citizens in Washington have the right to propose and pass laws directly, or pass them through the state legislature through what is called the “initiative process”. They also can effectively veto laws passed by the legislature and governor through what is called the “referenda process”. In all cases, political support is demonstrated through petitions signed by qualified voters. Initiative and referenda may impact a small electoral district, a city, a county, or the entire state. We are envied by millions of activists who do not have this power.

This document gives you information that will help you correctly gather signatures on initiative and referendum petitions. Initiatives and Referenda represent real power for grass roots activists because they make us “citizen legislators” with the collective ability to trump the legislature, the governor, and even rewrite the state constitution in some cases.

1 HOW DO I VOLUNTEER?

Unlike other activities, volunteering to gather signatures involves more than just saying “I volunteer”. Petition drives can be intense. A large number of signatures often need to be gathered very quickly, particularly as deadlines approach. **Above all, signatures must be gathered correctly to prevent them from being disqualified.** All of this requires a willingness to be trained and a bit of precision from you. Also, local coordinators responsible for signature drives in your area will need flexibility in how you are deployed to ensure that your time is not wasted.

2 TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The state has standards for what constitutes a valid signature, and all of these standards must be met when you circulate petitions. If they are not met, some or all of your signatures could be disqualified. Make sure your valuable time is not wasted by meeting all of these standards:

1. Don't Share Sheets. Every petition sheet that can be signed by more than one person must be circulated and certified by one – and only one – individual. When circulating, NEVER allow your petition sheets out of your possession. Treat signature sheets as you would treat a large bag of money. Don't let other people collect signatures for you – get them signature sheets of their own.

2. Witnessing and Other Issues. As a circulator, you must personally witness EACH signature being placed on your sheet. Each signor must be a registered voter in the district of the petition (*For a county petition, for example, signors must be registered to vote in that county. For a statewide petition, signors may be registered to vote anywhere in Oregon*). No signor may knowingly sign the same petition more than once. You may not ask someone to sign if you know they are not qualified to do so. Each person must sign the petition themselves AND fill out the related information on their signature line. You may not correct or modify any of the information a signor places on a signature. If they make a mistake, set the sheet aside with a note and contact your captain or coordinator.

3. Dealing with Known Bad Signatures. If you discover an invalid signature on your petition sheet (*For example if someone signs who is registered to vote in another state or if someone signs the sheet “Mickey Mouse”*), draw a SINGLE LINE through the entry. This entry will not be counted by election officials and will not count against your effort. DO NOT DO THIS UNLESS YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY SURE THE SIGNATURE IS INVALID. If you are not sure, MARK THE SHEET WITH A POST-IT NOTE, give it to your coordinator, and start another sheet.

4. Certification, Errors and Turn-In. When you are finished gathering signatures on a petition sheet, Be sure to certify that you witnessed each and every signature placed on the sheet. You do this by filling out and signing the circulator certification section on the back of the petition sheet. DO NOT place your signature on the certification before you are finished circulating the sheet.

5. Errors. If you make ANY errors, or don't know how to proceed in a given situation, DO NOT TRY TO CORRECT YOUR ERRORS. Set the sheet aside, put a post-it on the sheet documenting the problem, and start collecting on a new sheet. Seek advice from the campaign how to handle sheets with errors or possible errors. Remember, you are making an investment in time when you collect signatures – make sure your time isn't wasted. If you decide you are done circulating a particular signature sheet, even if there are empty signature lines remaining, certify the sheet and give it to your coordinator or mail it in. If you follow these guidelines you will be fine. Sometimes, though not often, opposing campaigns will send people around who will try to induce you to make a mistake. They

will try to cause you to make errors in hopes of lodging complaints hoping to get your signatures disqualified. They may say things like, “I think I’ve signed this already. Can I sign again? [The answer would be NO] But if you stick to these guidelines and take care of your sheets, you will be fine.

3 HOW TO GET SIGNATURES

When your coordinator gives you a signature gathering assignment, here is how to get a lot of signatures and have a great experience as well.

1. Equip Yourself. You will need a piece of cardboard or foam board slightly larger than the signature sheets. These work better than clipboards and are more comfortable. You will also need some signature sheets and a couple of rubber bands to hold your sheets down from the wind. A hat can protect you from the sun. Wear comfortable shoes and weather appropriate clothing. Look neat and well groomed. Have extra pens on hand with black or blue ink - **do not use pencil**. If you are collecting signatures door-to-door, your coordinator must provide you with a “walking list” (a list of homes and the people who live there listed in order of street number) and possibly a map. **You must always have a copy of the initiative or referendum text on hand to be examined by any prospective signor upon request.** Often, but not always, this text is included on the signature sheets. It can be helpful to bring someone with you to help carry things, keep you company, and find signature gathering opportunities. If a patient young child is willing to go with you, he or she can socially disarm folks who otherwise would not talk to you.

2. Remember, You Are a Volunteer. Do not attempt to buy, sell, or trade signature sheets. Do not offer potential signors anything of value in exchange for their signatures. If you are an employer, you may not ask employees to circulate signature sheets as a condition of their employment or else they could be regarded as professional signature gatherers and be subject to another set of standards. Employees may offer customers the opportunity to sign petitions, but must adhere to the signature gathering standards described here.

3. Remember Your Rights. You have the right to gather signatures, on public property open to public traffic and private property with the permission of the owner. You do not have the right to obstruct or interfere with the public use of the property. When questions related to these issues arise while you are collecting signatures, open yourself to compromises that preserve your ability to collect signatures efficiently within your time frame. **If you cannot resolve these issues agreeably, call your coordinator and ask for help.** Remember, this is not the venue to spend hours debating your rights with public officials - let your coordinators do that. This is a time to focus on collecting valid signatures on your sheets quickly. Post offices are generally off-limits.

4. Make the “Ask”. Each person who circulates petitions will have their own style of approaching potential signors. Be yourself, but be assertive - people will not sign your petition unless you ask them to. **Do not think of yourself as intruding on peoples’ lives. You are providing an important service. After all, you are offering people a chance to exercise their franchise without even going out of their way.**

Begin by making sure your prospect is registered to vote in the district effected by the petition (for statewide measures, voters may be registered anywhere in the state). If you are not gathering signatures door-to-door, a good opening line is simply, “Are you a registered Washington voter?” If the answer is “NO”, you won’t waste any time. If the answer is “YES,” you have opened a dialogue. Tell your prospect you are a volunteer gathering signatures for a petition that would (insert one line description here).

Try to engage your prospect in a BRIEF discussion about what your petition would do. You don’t want to spend too much time on any single signature prospect. Be sure that everything you say is accurate. Do not exaggerate or embellish anything. Minimize discussion of initiative details - that is for the campaign to come.

Finally, ask them to sign the petition if they have not already signed it elsewhere. When they sign the petition, make sure you witness them doing it. **GOOD JOB!** Now go get another one. When you are finished working with each signature sheet or if it is filled with signatures, be sure to certify the sheet as described above. When you have done this, turn in all of your completed petition sheets to your coordinator.