

Strategies for Effective Signature Gathering

Ballot Bulletin Feature

The process of gathering signatures can be one of the most difficult and expensive elements of a ballot initiative campaign. Considering the sheer number of signatures needed, time constraints and costs, initiative proponents quite rightly view the task with trepidation.

However, interacting with voters even before a ballot measure is qualified can be a very powerful political tool, particularly because ballot initiatives can increase voter turnout, help voters determine where candidates stand on important issues, and frame an election with issues that favor progressive interests.

In order to generate the maximum benefit from an initiative campaign, ballot initiative proponents should utilize the signature-gathering stage in the most efficient and strategic manner possible. This feature article highlights a list of steps and strategies to be considered before embarking on a signature-gathering campaign.

1. Find out about the Rules and Regulations

Each state and locality has different requirements about the process of gathering signatures in order to qualify a ballot measure. It is essential to understand initiative and referendum laws before petitions are even circulated. When does a petition need to be filed? What is the circulation period allowed to collect signatures? How many signatures are needed? When do they need to be collected? In which area of the state do they need to be collected? Most states require between five and 20 percent of voters in the last gubernatorial election to sign your petition in order to qualify. Several states require geographic distribution of the signatures. For example, in Utah, 10 percent of signatures must come from 20 of 29 counties.

- 1. Find out about the rules and regulations**
- 2. Decide on a method (paid vs. volunteer)**
- 3. Determine how many volunteers are needed**
- 4. Strive for accuracy**
- 5. Signature gathering for speed**
- 6. Signature gathering to mobilize supporters**
- 7. Effective volunteer management and training**
- 8. Think about the big picture**

2. Decide on a Method

There are numerous factors to consider when deciding how to collect signatures. There are benefits to using paid or volunteer signature gatherers; therefore many campaigns opt to use both.

The benefit of paid signature gathering is that it takes less time and energy, because the responsibility is passed to another entity. It also allows the campaign to devote energy toward other campaign priorities, such as fundraising and voter education. Furthermore, campaigns that use paid firms are more likely to qualify for the ballot.

However, paid signature gathering is typically more expensive than volunteer signature-gathering efforts. Paid signatures can cost anywhere from \$1-4 per signature, depending on the number of petitions being circulated in a state at the same time, the length of time available to collect the signatures, geographic requirements, and several other factors. Furthermore, the more complex the issue, the harder it is to obtain a signature because it takes more time to explain the issue to voters.

Some initiative experts believe that volunteer signature-gathering drives are nearly as costly as paid signature-gathering efforts; though expenditures tend to be hidden. Volunteer signature gathering will still require an organization to pay for the printing of petitions and managing a team of volunteers. If the campaign's capacity to effectively manage a successful statewide signature drive is in doubt, consider the possibility of sponsoring a smaller campaign, such as a citywide or countywide initiative.

3. Determine How Many Volunteers are Needed

The number of signatures that can be gathered by volunteers is proportional to the size and skill of the coalition and its volunteer base. How many members and potential volunteers do you have? Are your members activist-oriented? How many staff members need to be assigned to work on the signature-gathering campaign? How many hours will they work? If signatures need to be collected quickly, aim to collect 20-30 signatures per hour.

Signature gatherers who operate an education-based door-to-door campaign to collect signatures will typically yield no more than 10-12 signatures per hour.

A field plan should include tangible goals and deadlines about when, where and how signatures will be collected. Determine how many signatures must be collected each week and structure your schedule by working backwards from the signature deadline. Evaluate the signature-gathering rates throughout the campaign and adjust the campaign plan accordingly.

Signature-Gathering Formula to Determine Number of Volunteers Hours & Petitioning Locations:	
Number of signatures needed	235,000 signatures
Divided by the number of signatures per hour	30 signatures an hour
Divided by the number of weeks	20 weeks
= Number of volunteer hours your campaign needs to organize each week	= 390 hours
Divided by the number of volunteer hours that your volunteers will be working in total at one location per day	10 hours (e.g., five volunteers working two hours each)
= Number of Locations Needed Each Week	= 39 locations a week

Tips for Recruiting Volunteers

- If the campaign is solely dependent on volunteers, recruitment efforts should be a top priority throughout the length of the campaign. Most ballot initiative committees operate under the assumption, based on their experience, that volunteers will work three shifts before leaving a campaign.
- Because of such high turnover, every coalition member should proactively seek new volunteers for the campaign. The avenues available to recruit volunteers are enormous. Initiative advocates have been known to recruit volunteers at movie lines, malls, on the street, whilst going door-to-door, at events and through their coalition. Strive to recruit local members of the community. Don't be afraid to rely on friends, families and acquaintances. Some campaigns use house parties to expand their volunteer base and to raise money for the campaign. A well-organized house party of 40 can generate \$1000, six new volunteers and two people who agree to host parties of their own.
- The more engaged volunteers are, the less likely they are to leave a campaign. Keep your volunteers engaged by providing them with training and concrete tasks that match their skill level, talent, and interests.
- After every shift, talk with volunteers about their experience and ask them (immediately) to recommit to an additional volunteer activity. It is far easier to convince people to continue to volunteer if done so face-to-face or over the phone, rather than

4. Strive for Accuracy

The accuracy rate of signatures gathered in a volunteer fashion is often higher than paid signature-gathering methods. Either way, be vigilant in randomly checking the validity of the signatures gathered by volunteers or by a paid signature-gathering firm. A good way of reducing inaccuracy is to require petitioners to begin their interaction with citizens with the question, "Are you registered to vote in this state?"

Knowing the exact procedure and regulations for validating signatures can help ensure accuracy. Does the local county clerk verify the signatures or does the Secretary of State's office? Is every signature checked or are signatures verified through random sampling? Find out a list of actions that lead to the disqualification of a signature and make sure that every signature gatherer knows about these regulations. Are signatures only valid if black ink is used? Is a signature declared invalid if a citizen uses his or her postal address and not a physical address?

It is wise to establish a friendly rapport with the staff at the local city, county or state elections division—they can be a valuable resource and ally. Election division staff can be an excellent "go to" information source about the process, and they are often responsible for the implementation and management of the administrative and logistical side of things, such as printing the petitions and assessing the validity of gathered signatures.

Did you Know?

Fraudulent signature-gathering practices are common, particularly among certain paid signature-gathering firms, and evidence of fraud can draw undesirable attention to your campaign.

In Oregon during the 2002 election cycle, the Voter Education Project (a nonprofit organization working to improve the integrity of the initiative process) observed that fraudulent signature-gathering practices correlated with signature gatherers who were carrying several petitions for different campaigns and were being paid by the signature. To reduce fraud during signature gathering, the Oregon AFL-CIO sponsored a successful initiative in 2002 that requires all paid petition circulators to be defined as employees—not independent contractors—and paid by the hour. Petition circulators are now also eligible for unemployment benefits, and signature collection firms are now required to pay taxes and unemployment insurance premiums.

If considering using a paid signature-gathering firm, make an informed decision. In order to reduce the incidence of fraud, consider hiring a company that pays its petitioners by the hour rather than by the signature. Contact a firm's previous clients, inquire about its signature-gathering practices, and obtain firm answers about the company's success rate at collecting the necessary number of accurate signatures within the designated period of time. Make sure to negotiate a contract that outlines procedures for grievances, such as what happens if the firm and its employees or independent contractors are deceitful, or if they fail to gather the required number of signatures. Be sure to have a ballot initiative lawyer review the terms of the contract before signing anything.

5. Signature Gathering for Speed

There are two different methods commonly used for collecting signatures—one approach focuses on speed, the other on using the process to educate and mobilize supporters (please refer to the signature gathering model outlined in point six for advice about educational methods of signature gathering). If as many signatures need to be collected as possible in the shortest period of time, there are several tried and true strategies to ensure success.

In order to collect in excess of 20 signatures per hour (which is fairly aggressive), consider requiring signature gatherers to only petition in front of busy malls and universities and places of high volume traffic, such as parades, rallies, book fairs, sports and other entertainment venues. Ideally, signature gatherers should target events that cater to a demographic that is known to be supportive of the particular initiative.

Both paid and volunteer signature gatherers should be aware of proven tactics used to acquire signatures in an efficient manner. One common strategy is for the signature gatherer to place a pen in a citizen's hand the moment he or she begins speaking. Petitioners who can manage to have four petitions signed at once also save valuable time. (This is different than a petitioner holding four different petitions for four different initiatives.) Once someone has agreed to sign the petition, the petitioner should hand the citizen the petition to complete, and then continue asking others to sign the initiative petition. It is a waste of time for the petitioner to watch a citizen fill out a petition form. Petitioners can check the validity of the signature once the citizen returns the petition to them. It takes considerable skill, however, to do this well.

When speed is imperative, it is often not possible for the signature gatherer to engage in educational discussions with every citizen. One effective technique to provide citizens with more information is to hand them a leaflet that explains the initiative in greater detail or refers them to the campaign's website address.

Drawing attention to petitioning efforts can help save time. Campaigns should consider requiring their signature gatherers to dress in a uniform manner, by, for example, wearing brightly colored hats, "volunteer," or name badges. Furthermore, a uniform style of dress has the added benefit of giving members of the public the impression that this campaign is professional and organized. It can also be effective to build the campaign message into signature-gatherer's attire by using clever, amusing or easily understood words and images on T-shirts or buttons. The message could be as simple as "Yes on 65," or as emotive as the T-shirts worn by canvassers for the Humane Society's initiative in Florida last year to ban the use of small gestation crates for pregnant pigs. Canvassers wore T-shirts with an image of a pig trapped in a tiny crate.

6. Signature Gathering to Mobilize Supporters

Signature-gathering drives can be used to achieve other campaign objectives by mobilizing the public, supporters and members into action. A volunteer signature-gathering campaign is a tangible, practical way to work toward a cause. The process of organizing volunteers to spend a few hours a week collecting signatures for what could potentially become law is a way to channel energy into a goal-orientated activity that demands specific time-commitments and actions. In addition, if conducted appropriately, volunteer signature-gathering drives will have sincere, altruistic citizens communicating one-on-one with not only potential voters but also potential volunteers and financial contributors. The process of gathering signatures for—and donating a small amount of money to—an eventually successful initiative campaign can be an empowering experience for all involved. Furthermore, the information collected during a well-structured educational-based signature-gathering drive can build the campaign's voter list of issue and initiative-friendly volunteers and voters, and can form the basis of an effective GOTV campaign during the election cycle, and for future election periods to come.

In recent years, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) has developed a model field organizing strategy around their initiative work that effectively incorporates many organizational goals into the signature gathering phase, including volunteer recruitment, fundraising, and identification of voter's position on issues. In order to utilize a more comprehensive, education-based method of gathering signatures, they develop work plans based on yielding no more than 10-12 signatures per hour.

The NGLTF shapes an education and persuasion campaign based on their research of how many votes they need to win and in which districts. The NGLTF focuses on empower the local community by training local groups that have established networks within the targeted district. In any field operation, it is ideal for community members to gather signatures and educate members of the public that are within their sphere of influence, such as their neighbors, the people at their gym, colleagues, family and friends.

Ballot initiative organizers should assess and record citizen's interest in a ballot measure by using a commonly used scale of 1 to 5. A rating of 1 means an individual will vote with the campaign and help the campaign in some capacity (by either volunteering time or donating money). A rating of 2 means the voter will vote with the campaign but will not volunteer time or donate money. A rating of 3 indicates that the voter is uncertain as to how to vote; a rating of 4 means the voter will vote against the campaign, and a rating of 5 means the citizen is actively working with the opposition. Usually, campaigns conduct follow-up with people who are ranked as a 1 after the voting day in order to ask them to volunteer or donate money. Campaigns also tend to conduct voter education campaigns with 3s, and GOTV drives with people who register as 1s and 2s.

Signature-gathering methods that also assess where voter's stand on the initiative allows a campaign to determine whether they have the votes to win—or are on track to get them. This method also creates an opportunity to persuade voters and register non-voting members of the public. Given that the majority of the voting-age population does not vote in most elections, identifying and motivating supporters is essential. In addition, this approach enables campaigns to build the confidence and capability of volunteers and community leaders. An incredible amount of supporters and potential activists—75,000 in total— were identified as “gay friendly” by the NGTLF during the “no” campaign against an initiative to repeal Miami-Dade County's anti-discrimination law in September 2002. The data collected during this campaign can now be used to advance their agenda in the future, by, for example, recruiting and supporting gay-friendly candidates.

Increasingly, state legislatures have been reluctant to implement or fund voter-approved ballot initiatives. Progressive organizations and activists can hold legislators' feet to the fire if they can prove that their issue still resonates amongst citizens even after the election through tactics such as letter writing, phone calls, one-on-one meetings and rallies. This is not the case for campaigns that use a paid signature-gathering firm and then a TV-heavy voter-persuasion strategy. Campaigns lacking a strong field component are typically less able to organize a grassroots campaign to pressure legislators to enact the law as approved by voters.

It may be useful to integrate educational components of the campaign, such as speakers' bureaus, forums and debates, with the signature-gathering drive. For example, some campaigns have organized media and message workshops for local political and community leaders, to help inform influential spokespeople about the issue and prepare them for possible questions from journalists during the campaign.

If the campaign chooses to augment the signature-gathering drive with voter registration efforts, make sure campaign staff are aware of the laws and requirements regarding these matters and how it relates to the campaign's fundraising and coordinating activities.

7. Effective Volunteer Management and Training

Considering that signature gatherers will be interacting with up to 20 percent of potential voters, it is essential that the campaign establish a structure to manage and train volunteer signature-gatherers.

Management

All well organized signature-gathering campaigns have a clear line of management authority. Most effective campaigns establish staff positions to oversee canvassers and the day-to-day-operations of signature drives. Realistically, a campaign should aim to have one management position for every 10 volunteers. The Humane Society, for example, organizes a signature-gathering campaign around the following management staff positions:

- *1,000 Club Coordinator*: recruits and stays in contact with members who have collected 1,000 signatures or more.
- *Events Coordinator*: finds well-attended public events, such as rallies and parades, and recruits and schedules volunteers to collect signatures at these events.
- *Campus Coordinators*: recruits and schedule public signature gatherers for university campuses.
- *Location Coordinators*: schedules volunteers or canvassers to collect signatures at one location, such as a local mall, on a weekly basis.
- *City Coordinators*: recruits and schedule public signature gatherers in designated city.
- *Statewide Coordinator*: oversees statewide signature-gathering efforts, recruits and manages other coordinators.

The benefit of a well-functioning management system is that the distribution of petitions can be more efficiently tracked. Tracking the progress of signature gathering enables a campaign to accurately allocate resources. Without closely tracking petitions, campaigns will struggle to evaluate best signature-gathering teams, ideal geographic locations, and the demographic of voters who appear to be most amenable to signing petitions. An electronic spreadsheet that tracks each petition should be set-up at the beginning of a campaign. Information collected should include the name, address, phone number and e-mail address of the

petitioner, the date the petition was given to the signature gatherer, the date it was given back, and the number of signatures collected, refer to exhibit A as an example.

Exhibit A: Signature-gathering Drive Tracking Example								
Petition #	Name	Address	Email	Phone Number	Collected	Date Handed Out	Date Handed Back	# of Sigs
4	Roger Bell	1045 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC, 20056	roger@empty.net	202-243- 5374	Union City Mall, 1000 Connecticut Ave, NW, Wash, DC	April 16, 2003	April 21, 2003	20

Training

A simple and ongoing training program for *all* signature gatherers and canvassers should be established, no matter how well trained someone thinks they are. This could take the form of a weekly workshop or through the “learn through example” approach whereby a novice signature gatherer works with an experienced signature gatherer for a set period of time. Campaigns have a responsibility to clearly outline signature gathering protocol and the overall initiative strategy and message to all of their coalition partners, and every signature gatherer, paid or unpaid.

Signature Gathering Protocol

All signature gatherers should:

- Be very familiar with the initiative and what it aims to achieve.
- Be on message and be able to succinctly respond to frequently asked questions. Signature gatherers should use a one-sentence opening line that effectively summarizes the initiative in a favorable light (e.g., “sign the petition to protect Seattle’s creeks”). Campaign staff should distribute a one-page sample script that outlines how signatures gatherers should talk about the initiative to the public.
- Understand that they are responsible for collecting and sharing information about the response to the initiative as they interact with the public. If the campaign’s overall message isn’t resonating with the public, it should be reassessed. In fact, some initiative proponents devise ballot language and messaging strategies by first going out into the field and testing various messages as they gather signatures.
- Be methodical about sharing information with members of the public, by handing out a leaflet to every person that signs the petition and dutifully collecting the contact details of any individual that wants to volunteer with the campaign.
- Understand that they represent the campaign, and therefore should strive to be professional, positive, sincere and articulate at all times.
- Be aware of the rules regarding signature validity and abide by them at all times.
- Practice efficient and proactive signature-gathering methods and maintain agreed upon quotas.
- Receive training and support and have all the resources they need, including directions to their signature gathering location, the appropriate clothing, spare pens, spare petitions and literature about the campaign.

Although these protocols apply specifically to volunteer signature-gathering drives, paid signature-gathering firms should ensure that at least some of these standards are in effect.

8. Think about the Big Picture

It may be worthwhile to consider structuring the signature-gathering drive so that it supports the organization's long-term political goals. Gathering signatures places a campaign in a position to gauge and influence public sentiment on many issues, not just a single initiative. Depending on a coalition's resources and time-constraints, signature-gathering efforts can create an opportunity to gather qualitative and quantitative information about voters' priorities and opinions on candidates for public office and political parties.

Coordinating field activities with other progressive organizations and campaigns (within the limits of the law) can help make the most of limited resources.¹ However, if another ballot initiative campaign or progressive organization is willing to collect signatures and talk with the public about another issue, it is important that these individuals understand the initiative and can convey the right message, and that the petitions they use are closely tracked. In order to ensure that an initiative is portrayed in the best possible manner, consider providing training to any ally who is willing to help the campaign.

Similarly, canvassers for candidates may want to consider carrying petitions on an initiative that the candidate supports (subject to any state law registration requirements), especially if it helps distinguish the candidate from other competitors. It is much easier to ask a voter their opinion on a specific initiative question than asking them to respond to a broad issue statement like "are you in support of the environment?"

For additional information or assistance, please contact the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC) at 202-223-2373 or refer to www.ballot.org. BISC maintains detailed state-by-state initiative requirements for qualifying a ballot measures in addition to a list of preferred consultants for progressive campaigns, including signature-gathering firms, lawyers and media experts, and comprehensive information on how to design, budget and manage an effective initiative campaign.

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¹ Canvassers for federal candidates who are interested in carrying ballot initiative petitions, may have to register and report under state law because this activity would be considered an in-kind contribution to a ballot committee.