

# California's Initiative Circulation Period

*Summary: California law specifies an **unusually short** amount of time to collect signatures to qualify an initiative for the ballot. This heavily advantages paid signature collection over volunteer efforts. To meet modern norms, California should allow **at least 18 months** to collect signatures.*

**Q: Once an initiative petition is cleared for circulation in California, how long do proponents have to collect signatures?**

**A:** 180 days, as specified in California Elections Code § 9014.

**Q: What does a normal signature collection period look like?**

**A:** Of the 24 U.S. states with the initiative system, half give proponents *at least 18 months* to collect signatures, including all states that border California (underlined below):

*No time limit:* Arkansas, Ohio

*2 years or more:* Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Nebraska, Oregon, Utah

*18 months or more*<sup>1</sup>: Idaho, Missouri, Nevada, Wyoming

*1 year or more:* Alaska, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota

*6 months or more:* Colorado, Washington

*Less than 6 months:* **California**, Massachusetts, Michigan, Oklahoma

**Q: Why is California's initiative process dominated by petition management companies?**

**A:** Because 180 days is too short for anything *but* paid signature collection. As the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) explains:

*"Volunteer efforts are time-consuming because they often are less well-organized and more often are subject to disruptions when volunteers fail to show up. Longer circulation periods clearly benefit volunteer petition drives."*<sup>2</sup>

**Q: Would extending California's initiative circulation period result in a flood of new initiatives?**

**A: Doubtful.** As the NCSL notes, the states with *the shortest* signature collection periods (California, Colorado, Washington) tend to have the most initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Also Switzerland, which has had the initiative system longer than any U.S. state.

<sup>2</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures (2002). Petition Circulation Periods.

