

The Seattle Times Newspapers In Education presents

Electing the President: A Guide to the Election Process

Produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters



Thank you for joining our Wednesday series about the presidential election, produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters through November 5. Last spring's chapters are online at lwvwa.org and will help students of all ages to understand the people, the parties and the issues regarding our election process.

Week Seven:

What's *this* on my Ballot?

Initiatives and Referenda

In a presidential election year like 2008, the race for president dominates the news. Choosing the person to fill America's top job is indeed important. But voters have other important choices to make when they get their ballots for the November election. In Washington state, voters will choose congressional representatives, the governor and other statewide officials, state legislators and some judges. Voters also will find statewide issues listed on their ballots. Depending on where they live, voters may find regional and local issues as well.

Why do people in Washington state vote on issues as well as candidates? The answer goes back to the early 1900s. Even though our state government has the same checks and balances as our national government, the people of Washington decided to build an extra "check" into the state constitution. In 1912, they amended the constitution to give citizens the power to bypass the state legislature and propose and pass laws directly. Because the people can *initiate* legislation, we call this constitutional power the *power of initiative*. A related power is called the *power of referendum*. The referendum power gets used when the legislature *refers* a law or a proposed law to the people for a vote.

There are two types of initiatives: An initiative to the people is placed on the ballot through the collection of signatures. To qualify, an initiative must have valid signatures from eight percent of the number of voters who voted in the last election for governor.

An initiative to the legislature must also have a qualifying number of signatures, but the next step is different: this type of initiative gets submitted to the legislature at the next regular session in January. The legislature can then adopt the initiative as proposed, in which case it becomes law; reject or refuse to act on the initiative, in which case it then goes on the ballot in the next state general election; or approve an alternative, in which case both the original proposal and the alternative are placed on the ballot at the next state general election.

There are also two types of referenda: A *referendum measure* is a law passed by the legislature but referred to the voters because enough citizens signed a petition to review the law. The number of signers must be at least four percent of the number of people who voted in the last election for governor.

A *referendum bill* is a law proposed by the legislature but referred to the voters to determine whether the voters agree that the law should be passed.

Learn More:

- Pick one of the initiatives. Go to the Secretary of State's Web site secstate.wa.gov/elections to read the complete text. Visit the Web sites of the organizations who favor and oppose the initiative to see what they have to say about it. If you are in a classroom or other group, divide the group in two. Have one side present "pro" arguments and the other side present "con" arguments. Which side can come up with the most persuasive arguments?

Statewide Initiatives for the November 4, 2008 election

I-985 concerns **traffic congestion**. It proposes opening high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes to all traffic except during the peak hours of 6 – 9 a.m. and 3 – 6 p.m. It also calls for traffic lights to be synchronized so traffic flows more smoothly, and it requires removal of tolls imposed for road or bridge construction once the construction project is completed. People who favor the initiative say that traffic congestion is a major problem and that passing I-985 will help to reduce congestion. People who oppose the initiative say that the proposals in I-985 won't reduce congestion; they think it would be better to spend the \$600 million in state money on alternative transportation measures, education and health services. To learn more about the arguments favoring and opposing I-985, go to permanent-offense.org and no985.org.

I-1000 is sometimes called the "**Death with Dignity**" initiative. It proposes that a terminally ill individual may voluntarily end his or her own life. There are 16 "safeguards" to this procedure, such as the requirements that the decision be made in consultation with a physician and that a waiting period be observed. People who favor the measure say that it has worked well in Oregon for 10 years. People who oppose it say that terminally ill patients can get enough help at hospitals and hospices to manage their own treatment and die unaided. To learn more about the arguments for and against this initiative, go to yeson1000.org and noassistedsuicide.com.

Initiative 1029 concerns **long-term health-care workers**. These workers take care of patients — mostly seniors and people with disabilities — who need long-term care. The initiative would require long-term care workers to pass a certification examination, complete more training and undergo background checks. People who favor the initiative say that long-term care providers must meet patient care needs that are increasingly complex, so they need better training in order to provide safe, quality care. People who oppose the measure say training is already good and imposing more requirements would reduce the number of people available to work in this field as well as drive home care patients to hospitals. To learn more about the arguments favoring and opposing I-1029, go to yeson1029.org and communitycarecoalitionwa.org.

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