DAY 5: WHAT’S THIS ON MY BALLOT? — INITIATIVES & REFERENDA

In a presidential-election year, the race for president dominates the news. Choosing the person to fill America’s top job is important. But voters have other important choices to make this November. In Washington state, voters will choose congressional representatives, the governor, state legislators and other statewide officials, and some judges. Voters also will find statewide issues 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 8 percent of the number of voters who voted in the most recent 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. They can reject or refuse to act on the initiative, which then moves it to the ballot in the next state general election. Or they can 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 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 4 percent of the number of people who voted in the most recent 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

Research the ballot issues with VOTE411.org, the League of Women Voters’ one-stop shop for nonpartisan election information. Type in your address to see the races and issues that will appear on your ballot. What are the arguments and groups favoring and opposing each ballot issue?

NEXT: STATE ELECTIVE OFFICES

For more information on additional ballot measures concerning the state budget and debt, university investments, pollution liability insurance, and more, go to VOTE411.org.