

SB 47 – Petition DISCLOSE Act

SENATOR BEN ALLEN

SUMMARY

SB 47, the Petition DISCLOSE Act, helps voters make informed decisions by requiring initiative signature gatherers to disclose the top three funders of the committee organizing the campaign to voters before they sign to qualify the initiative for the ballot.

BACKGROUND

More than a century ago Governor Hiram Johnson introduced the initiative, referendum, and recall process to give ordinary Californians a fighting chance against powerful interests. But today only interests with lots of money are able to qualify ballot measures.

For the 2018 election, 37 initiatives qualified for circulation and 12 qualified for the ballot. And for 2016, a dizzying 115 initiatives qualified to circulate, and a near record 17 measures appeared on the November ballot. All of the propositions that qualified by signature gathering did so only after a million dollars or more was spent on paid signature gathering, with voters rarely knowing who the funders were.

Although committees supporting or opposing ballot measures must file periodic campaign finance reports, voters who sign petitions do not have easy access to this information when approached by a petition circulator. In fact, circulators are not required to know or disclose this information, even when asked.

Surveys consistently show that voters want improved public disclosure of the sources that fund ballot measures. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) found greater than 70 percent support for increasing public disclosure of funding sources for initiative campaigns each of the eight times that it asked that question. A February 2018 poll by the California Clean Money Campaign found that 79% of likely voters supported “Requiring initiative signature gatherers to show voters the top funders paying for their signature gathering.” Support was across the board: 84% of Democrats, 78% of Independents, and 73% of Republicans.

SOLUTION

SB 47 makes an overwhelmingly popular, commonsense improvement to California’s current campaign disclosure laws by requiring initiative signature gatherers to show voters the top three funders of the committee paying for the petition circulation before they sign. They can do so either by showing voters an easily-printable “Official Top Funders Sheet” or by listing the top three funders on the initiative signature page itself. Committees can optionally also list up to 3 endorsing individuals, corporations, or non-profit organizations.

The top funders must be calculated the same way that the California DISCLOSE Act (AB 249, now in effect) calculates funders of political ads about ballot measures, including AB 249's follow-the-money earmarking rules that identify the true source of funds for specific ballot measures even if they pass through multiple front groups. The top funders must be updated monthly.

SB 47 also makes printing of initiative petitions less expensive by allowing the text of initiatives to be stapled to the signature page rather than professionally bound, which allows initiative petitions to be printed at home.

Providing Californians with relevant facts about the source of money to qualify an initiative, referendum, or recall, and who endorses it, is a reasonable, important step the legislature can take to help voters make an informed decision about whether or not to sign a petition.

SUPPORT

California Clean Money Campaign (Sponsor)

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