



Observer Training

2023 Petition Signature Verification

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Overview

The power to directly enact or amend state law through initiative and referendum is an important constitutional right in Washington State. The Office of the Secretary of State plays a vital role in facilitating this important right.

The Secretary of State is responsible for verifying the validity of signatures submitted on initiative and referendum petitions. Only ballot measure petitions with a sufficient number of valid signatures will be certified for placement on the ballot.

Individuals from the campaigns for and against a measure are welcome to observe the signature validation process. Such individuals are “observers.” Observers play an important role in the verification of petition signatures. Observer participation helps bring transparency to the process and helps ensure the verification is conducted according to established rules and procedures.

The responsibility for validating signatures rests with the Secretary of State’s Elections Division. Observers are not authorized to participate in the decisions made during the check. All decisions regarding the acceptance or rejection of a signature will be made by the Secretary of State’s staff. It would be improper for the Secretary of State’s office to defer the decision making to sponsor and opposition advocacy groups.

To ensure that the Secretary of State’s responsibilities are carried out in an orderly manner, observers must adhere to the Observer Standards. A copy of these standards is included in your Observer Packet.

Additionally, the Elections Division hopes these standards help clarify the observer’s role in the petition checking process. The Secretary of State’s Office appreciates the cooperation of all observers.

Information for Observers

Initiative and Referenda sponsors and opposition groups can appoint as many observers as they would like. All prospective observers must attend Observer training provided by the Secretary of States Office before they can participate in observing the signature verification process. We require a minimum of two per side. Only one observer per side will be allowed to observe at a time.

It is critically important that observers follow the direction and stay within designated observation zones when directed by staff. Tape will mark the floor indicating various zones for observations, signature checking and processing.

The signature checkers receive signature comparison training conducted by the Washington State Patrol Forensics (WSP) office. In addition to the WSP techniques, checkers follow the “Signature Verification Standard” set forth in WAC 434-379-020.

Any questions should be directed to the floor manager or supervisor on duty. The Office of Secretary of State will review and consider issues presented by observers and will notify both sides of any response.

The Secretary of State's staff will:

- Treat observers with respect and courtesy.
- Provide observer training for official observers.
- Train each signature checker on the signature verification standard as set forth in state rule.
- Determine the total number of observers allowed within the checking area with both sides allowed equal representation. The Secretary of State's Office will not recognize more than one sponsor and opposition organization for the purposes of appointing observers.
- Notify sponsor and opposition organizations of the dates and times of the signature check process.
- Notify all parties of any responses or modifications to the process.
- Discuss any observer issues with the lead observer.
- Request an observer leave the premises if an observer is:
 - Compromising the integrity or efficiency of the check by their actions.
 - Not following the Observer Standards.

Sponsor and Opposition Organizations will:

- Provide observers who will:
 - Adhere to the standards set by the Secretary of State.
 - Attend Secretary of State Observer Training.
- Appoint lead observers to represent the organization during the check.

Observers Responsibilities

Observers will:

- Attend Observer Training.
- Treat Secretary of State Staff and other observers with respect and courtesy.
- Sign in and out with the Floor Manager.
- Wear identity tags, provided by the Floor Manager, while observing.
- Direct all questions to the Floor Manager.
- Minimize physical disruption of the process.
- Behave in a manner that is not distracting to signature checkers.
- Leave when asked if not following Observer Standards set by the Secretary of State.
- Leave the building when not actually observing the process. This includes break and mealtimes.

Observers may **not**:

- Ask questions of individual signature checkers nor ask the checker to slow down, speed up, or otherwise alter his or her work.
- Make record of the names, addresses, or other information on the petitions or related records. A copy of [RCW 29A.72.230](#) is included with these standards. Observers may make other notes.
- Handle petition sheets or computers.
- **Bring cell phones, digital recorders, cameras, or any other prohibited communication or recording device into the signature check area.**

Signature Check Process

Step 1—Petition Sheet Inspection

We receive several thousand signature petition sheets for an initiative or referendum that submits signatures. We inspect every sheet for possible fraud and damage. After the sheets have been inspected, the sheets are scanned.

Step 2—Signature Line Count

When the scanned images are loaded into the system, the signature verification checkers identifies the blank lines and removes them from the count. Each image is inspected to verify the system correctly identified lines with signatures. The total number of signatures lines is then determined. If the total number of signatures is above the minimum required, a program will be run to randomly select 3% of the signatures to be checked. The system identifies the random signatures to be verified.

Step 3—Check the Signatures

The randomly identified signatures are compared to the voter's registration signature. A signature may be rejected for four different reasons:

- Voter not found in the voter registration database. This may mean the signer is not a registered voter. The voter may not be found in the database if they moved, changed their name, or if the handwriting on the petition sheet was not clear. These signatures are rejected.
- The signature does not match. Signature checkers receive training from the State Patrol before they can verify a signature match. If the address on the petition sheet is the same as the voter registration address, but the signatures do not match, the signature is rejected.
- Duplicate signature. A registered voter may sign an initiative or referendum only once. Once a signature was accepted for a voter, the system does not allow acceptance of a second signature. The second signature is categorized as a duplicate signature.

- **Signature Missing.** On rare occasions, a voter’s signature may be missing from the voter registration database. In this case, the signatures are considered pending. If needed, the Secretary of State will contact the County Auditor for the signature.

A second check is completed by another checker to verify signatures not found and signatures that do not match before a final decision is made about the acceptance or rejection of each signature.

If there are not enough valid signatures to meet the minimum requirements to certify the petition after the random check, the Secretary of State will do a full check. Every signature is verified in a full check.

Step 4—Certification

If an initiative or referendum passes the random check (or full check as necessary), the measure is certified to appear on the ballot (Initiative to the People or Referenda) or sent to the Legislature for a vote. A measure cannot be rejected based on a random check.