



BALLOT INITIATIVE TRANSPARENCY ACT

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BALLOT INITIATIVE TRANSPARENCY ACT – TO CLARIFY AND SIMPLIFY CALIFORNIA’S INITIATIVE PROCESS – PASSES SENATE COMMITTEE

*Act would simplify ballot language for voters and provide information
on major backers of initiatives*

Sacramento –With nearly eight in 10 California voters supporting improvements to the state’s initiative process that increase clarity and provide voters more information, SB 1253 (Steinberg) was approved Tuesday by the State Senate’s Elections Committee.

SB 1253, the Ballot Initiative Transparency Act (BITA), will create clearer initiatives, simpler ballots and better information for California voters. Introduced by Senate pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, BITA is supported by a broad and diverse group of organizations that includes the League of Women Voters of California, California Common Cause, California NAACP, California AARP, Think Long Committee for California and California Forward, among others. These organizations spent the past year sharing ideas and opinions for changes with more than 60 civic groups to determine which would make the greatest improvements and which enjoyed the most support.

“We have worked with people and groups from across the political spectrum – who rarely agree on things – to produce a nonpartisan set of recommendations that will allow for early public review of initiative language,” said Kathay Feng, Executive Director of California Common Cause. “This bill will create an enhanced voter information website that clearly identifies initiative backers and gives initiative supporters the right to make improvements to their own measures following public and Legislative feedback.”

Although voters greatly value the voice that the initiative process provides them, increasingly they also feel like it no longer works as well as it should and that too often special interests highjack the process. BITA keeps what voters like most about the process – based on polls and focus groups, as well as PPIC’s polling, and discussions with dozens of civic organizations – while making improvements to the parts they feel work least well.

“What BITA will ensure is that the information voters receive will be better,” said Helen Hutchison, Vice President for Advocacy and Program of the League of Women Voters of California. “Initiatives can be confusing and poorly written. Voters deserve clear and straight-forward information about what initiatives do. This bill creates guidelines to ensure that the information voters receive is written in clear and straightforward language.”

The main elements of BITA would:

- **Give voters more useful information about initiatives so they can make informed decisions.** This law would enhance the Secretary of State's website and use of digital channels, giving voters *one-stop access to information* about individuals and groups behind each initiative and *exposing the sources of funding*. Voters also could request an email version of the voter guide, reducing the costs of printing and mailing the guides.
- **Create ballot materials that are drafted in clear and straight-forward language.** Voters overwhelmingly want voter-friendly, understandable ballot statements and arguments. This law would require ballot statements to make it clear if they raise or impose a tax or repeal an existing law and avoid technical jargon.
- **Identify and correct mistakes in an initiative before it appears on the ballot.** Now, initiative backers have few options to correct or withdraw initiative language, even when legal flaws are identified. This law would give voters an opportunity to comment on initiatives before they are circulated for signature. While extending the time for gathering signatures, this law would require the Legislature to hold earlier public hearings to review initiatives. This law would also allow the authors of an initiative to withdraw it after petitions and signatures are certified, but before ballots are printed, *simplifying the ballot*.

The Ballot Initiative Transparency Act would address California voters' greatest concerns about the current initiative process. According to a recent PPIC survey, 83% of Californians agree that initiative wording is too complicated and confusing. 84% favor increasing public disclosure of funding sources for both signature gathering and initiative campaigns. Almost as many (77%) support a review process to help avoid legal problems and drafting errors.

"We are very worried, as are most Californians, that the initiative process has been dominated by big-money special interests that are able to spend more than \$10 million and rely heavily on paid signature gathering firms," said Alice Huffman, President of the California NAACP. "That isn't how the process is supposed to work, and that doesn't help Californians. BITA will return the power of the vote to the people."

Proponents of the act believe potential voters will take a renewed interest in participating in the initiative process as complicated language that leads to voter apathy will be clarified. This will support a more participatory democratic process.

"Our group feels strongly that the voters of California should be empowered so our system of democracy can function effectively," said Nathan Gardels with the Think Long Committee for California. "This bill will allow voters to make informed decisions. It also will advance meaningful reform by allowing initiative backers to make changes to their proposals."

Under the proposal, backers of an initiative would lose no power and have nothing taken away from them – in fact, they would gain added power. Currently, initiative backers can't make corrections and changes and can't work out a better proposal with the Legislature that would potentially save themselves money and taxpayers money down the road.

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