

BY JENNIE DRAGE BOWSER

One of the little-noticed stories of the 2008 election was the escalating tug-of-war between legislatures and activists over the rules governing the citizen initiative process.

The struggle has ramped up dramatically since the 2006 election. Legislatures in the 24 states that allow initiatives have shown a keen interest in improving the process ever since the use of the citizen petition to place issues on the ballot skyrocketed in the 1990s. And recent legislative activity has been higher than ever before.

States have passed about double the number of bills addressing the initiative process in the 2007-2008 biennium (a total of 47 so far, with legislatures still in session in a handful of states) compared to the previous two biennia (22 in 2005-2006 and 32 in 2003-2004).

Why the heightened interest?

The process has changed tremendously in the past two decades. The initiative “industry”—individuals and firms that make a living from the initiative process by researching and drafting proposals, gathering signatures or campaigning for or against initiatives—has exploded. The average number of initiatives on ballots nationwide has doubled from 31 a year in the 1970s to 62 a year in the 2000s. And laws governing the process haven’t kept pace.

Some state laws, for example, do not specify which official has the authority to investigate and prosecute abuses, while others lack the capacity to verify that circulators meet the legal qualifications.

Colorado Representative Andy Kerr was one of the co-sponsors of an unsuccessful referendum on the 2008 ballot that would have made qualifying constitutional initiatives harder, but statutory initiatives easier.

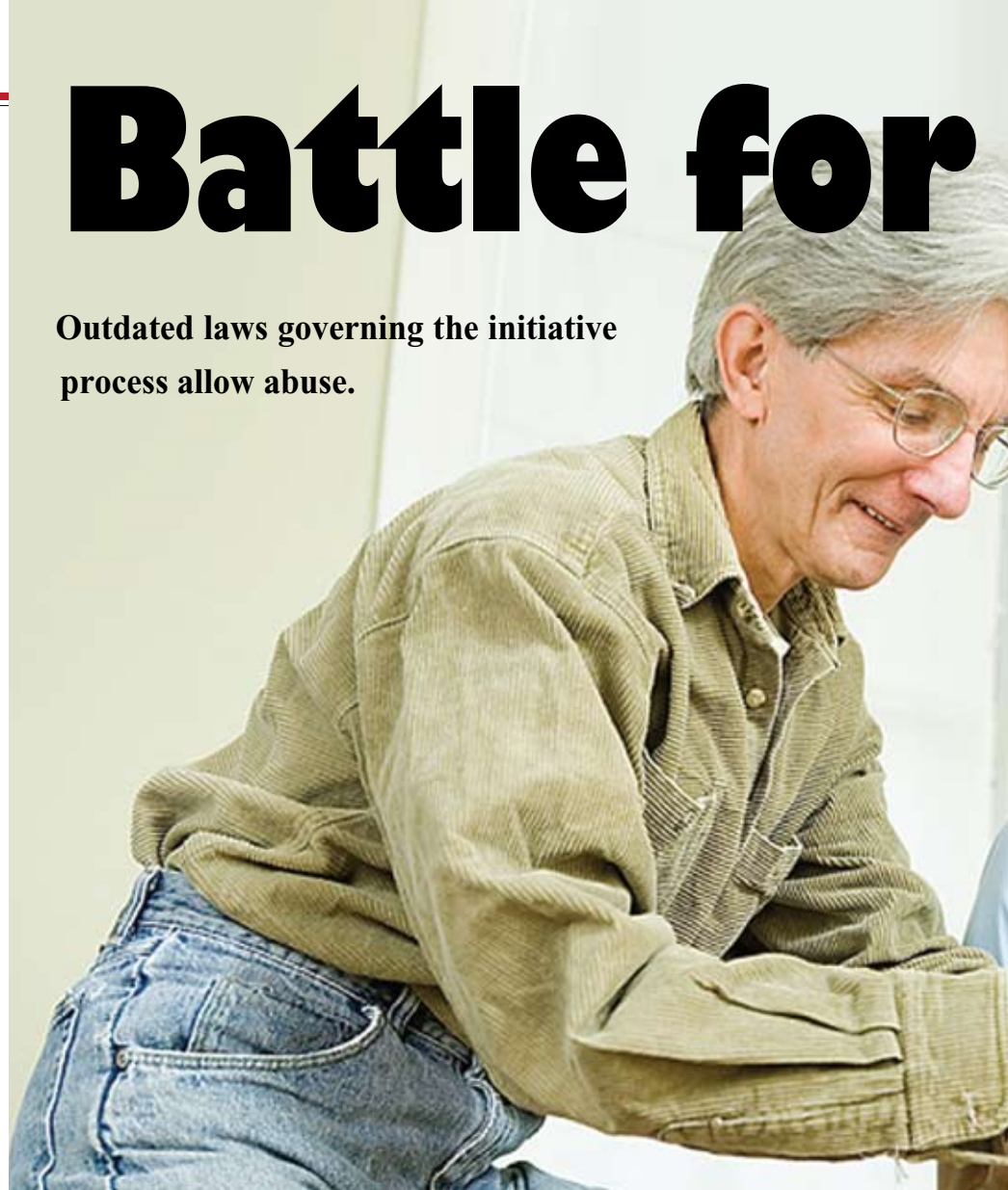


**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**ANDY KERR**  
**COLORADO**

Jennie Drage Bowser is NCSL’s expert on ballot measures.

# Battle for

## Outdated laws governing the initiative process allow abuse.



He sees flaws in the initiative process, particularly in a state that had more measures on the ballot in 2008 than any other state.

“Citizens have a lot of power to change and propose laws and constitutional amendments,” he says. “But the way the process is set up in Colorado, our constitution can be changed frequently without these amendments being fully vetted first.”

### HARD SELL

It is difficult, however, for legislatures to limit the number of initiatives qualifying for ballots, and whether or not they should is a controversial question. Increasing the number of signatures required, tinkering with time limits and restricting the subject matter involves amending state constitutions. And that requires voter approval.

It isn’t always easy to convince voters that changing the process is a good idea, as Kerr

learned in November.

Making the process more difficult rarely slows down well-funded petition efforts that can afford to hire and pay an army of circulators. It’s the grassroots efforts, which depend on volunteers, that suffer from higher signature thresholds and shorter petition timeframes.

Details of the process in state law are what legislatures can, and with increasing frequency do, change without voter approval. States have clarified rules for petition formats, restructured timelines to allow for the added administrative burdens of processing a high volume of petitions, and spelled out more clearly the procedures for evaluating and counting signatures. Voter education is an area ripe for reform, too, particularly as technological advances make it easier to use multimedia and multi-lingual approaches to explain measures on the ballot.

# the Ballot



## **SIGNATURE-GATHERING FRAUD**

Along with the explosion in the number of initiatives is the issue of fraud. The courts removed at least half a dozen measures from the ballot in 2006 for deceit in gathering signatures. In a Montana case, a court wrote that the “signature-gathering process was permeated ... by a pattern of deceit, fraud and procedural noncompliance.”

Specific instances of fraud in Montana, Nevada and Oklahoma included circulators who opened the phone book and forged the signatures of listings onto their petitions. Others inserted carbon paper and a second petition beneath the one they asked voters to sign, thus obtaining a signature on another petition without the signer’s knowledge. One circulator told voters they needed to sign in three different places if they supported the issue. In reality, they were unwittingly sign-

ing three separate petitions. And accusations of circulators who misrepresent or conceal the content of their petition are common.

Kristina Wilfore is executive director of the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, which serves as a clearinghouse for progressive ballot measures. She says policing the process is tough.

“Part of the problem is that the state officials in charge of watching over the process aren’t equipped, funded or modernized enough to catch the few bad apples that are responsible for the vast majority of what eventually gets on the ballot,” she says.

Wilfore says that it was only a few years ago that she began to hear about extreme abuses in the process by a handful of signature-gathering companies.

Signature-gathering is now dominated by a few professional firms that hire people who make a living moving from state to state. In

more than one initiative state, they are not required to register. That means they cannot be identified or prosecuted for fraud because signatures can’t be traced to particular circulator. Wilfore calls the signature-gathering process “one of the most neglected areas” of the initiative process when it comes to state laws and regulations.

Efforts to curb abuse include new laws to ban paying signature gatherers on a per-signature basis, and instead require an hourly wage. Six states now prohibit payment-per-signature, with three of those laws adopted in the 2007-2008 legislative session. Other new laws require circulators to offer people a chance to read the proposal in full before signing, set age and residency requirements for circulators, and apply criminal penalties for forgeries and fraud in knowingly submitting a petition with invalid signatures.

## **ACTIVISTS STRIKE BACK**

Initiative supporters are rarely happy when the legislature enacts changes that add to the cost or complexity of the initiative process. In some states, they have fought back by trying to get measures on the ballot that would make the initiative process easier.

But voters don’t necessarily support them. In 2006, Colorado voters rejected Amendment 38, an initiative that would have significantly reduced regulation of the initiative process. And petitions easing regulation of the initiative process were circulated but failed to qualify this year in Arizona, Massachusetts, Oregon and Washington.

Legislatures started calling for reform of the initiative process in the early 2000s. It’s not just state legislatures that are calling for reform these days, however. Cities and academic groups and even pro-initiative groups have joined the call for change.

Given the number of initiatives on statewide ballots over the past two decades, it’s clear the initiative is not going away. It will continue to be a vibrant process in most of the states that allow it. But it’s up to legislatures to ensure the process promotes ethical behavior among those involved, and that the rules surrounding it allow for as much transparency and deliberation as possible without restraining a process whose popularity is not likely to decline. It’s not an easy task, and is certain to be one that legislatures grapple with well into the next decade. ■