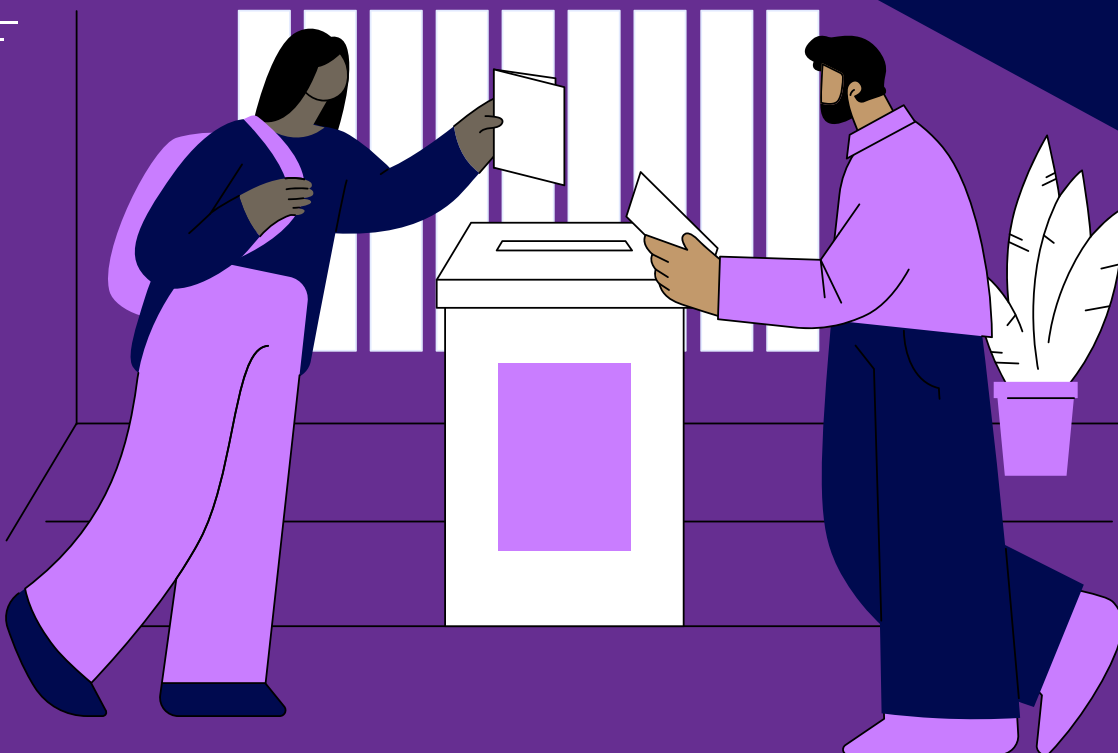


BALLOT BASICS: YOUR VOTE, YOUR VOICE.



CALIFORNIA
ASSOCIATION
OF REALTORS®

CALIFORNIA BALLOT MEASURES: HISTORY AND PROCESS

California's relationship with direct democracy goes back more than 100 years. In a special election held on October 10, 1911, voters approved a package of constitutional amendments placed on the ballot by reform-minded Governor Hiram Johnson. The amendments created the instruments of direct democracy, giving voters three types of measures that can be placed directly on the ballot without consent of the legislature. When approved by the voters these three types of measures have the full force of law and do not need to be approved by legislators or signed by the Governor:

- **Initiative.** The electorate can bypass the legislature to directly adopt statutes or amend the California Constitution. Each of the two methods has its own signature thresholds.
- **Recall.** Voters can remove an elected official from office before the end of the elected official's term.
- **Referendum.** Voters can overturn a statute recently approved by the legislature.

The Legislature also has two pathways of its own to place a measure before voters: a legislative constitutional amendment or bond measure, and a legislative statute referred to voters for approval. This table below summarizes all measure types that can appear on a California statewide ballot.

AT A GLANCE: CALIFORNIA BALLOT MEASURE TOOLS

Tool	What It Does	Who Places It	Eligible Ballots
Initiative Statute	Adopts a new law or repeals or amends an existing statute by direct vote of the people.	Citizens, via signature gathering.	General election only (per SB 202, 2011).
Initiative Constitutional Amendment	Amends the California Constitution by direct vote of the people.	Citizens, via signature gathering.	General election only (per SB 202, 2011).
Referendum	Lets voters repeal a statute recently enacted by the Legislature.	Citizens, via signature gathering.	Next statewide election occurring at least 31 days after qualification (Primary or General).
Recall	Removes a state or local elected official before the term ends.	Citizens, via signature gathering.	Special election called by the Governor (typically 60 to 80 days after certification).
Legislative Constitutional Amendment or Bond	Constitutional amendments and bond measures placed on the ballot by the Legislature.	Legislature (2/3 vote of each house required).	Primary or General election.
Legislative Statute	A statute passed by the Legislature that is referred to voters for approval.	Legislature (majority vote of each house).	Primary or General election.

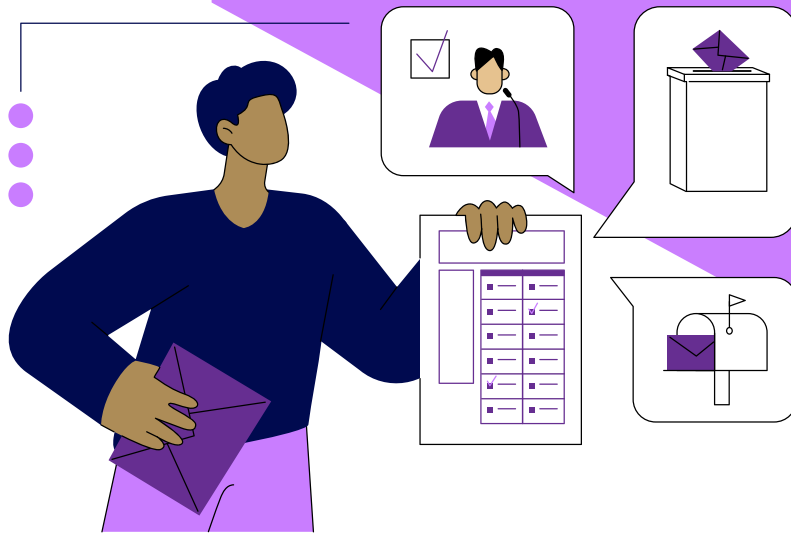
INITIATIVES

An initiative is the mechanism by which voters or the legislature propose and adopt new statutes or amendments to the California Constitution. Generally, any matter that is a proper subject of legislation may become an initiative, but **no initiative addressing more than one subject area may be submitted to voters or take effect.** (Often referred to as, the “single-subject rule”)

TWO TYPES OF INITIATIVES

Initiative Statute. Creates, amends, or repeals a state statute. Approval requires a simple majority of voters. The Legislature may amend or repeal an initiative statute only if (a) the initiative itself permits legislative amendment, or (b) a subsequent measure approved by the voters does so.

Initiative Constitutional Amendment. Amends the California Constitution. Approval requires a simple majority of voters. Once adopted, a constitutional amendment can only be changed by another vote of the people.



SIGNATURE REQUIREMENTS (CURRENT CYCLE)

Signature thresholds are tied to the total votes cast for Governor at the most recent gubernatorial election. The Secretary of State certifies the current numbers, which apply through the next gubernatorial cycle.

Measure Type	% of Last Gov. Vote (2022 Election)	Current Required Signatures	25% Trigger (Legislative Hearings)
Initiative Statute	5%	546,651	136,663
Initiative Constitutional Amendment	8%	874,641	218,661
Referendum	5%	546,651	N/A

Note. Once proponents reach 25% of the required signatures, they must immediately certify to the Secretary of State. Each house of the Legislature must assign the measure to committee and hold joint public hearings at least 131 days before the election. The Legislature may not amend the measure or block it from the ballot.

CITIZEN INITIATIVE TIMELINE (STEP BY STEP)

#	Stage	Timing
1	Draft submitted to Attorney General	Day 0
2	30-day public review period	Days 1 to 30
3	Joint LAO/Department of Finance fiscal estimate	Within 50 days of submission
4	Attorney General issues circulating title and summary	Within 15 days after fiscal estimate (≈ Day 65)
5	Signature circulation window (max 180 days)	From issuance of title and summary
6	25% signature certification triggers legislative hearings	When reached, during circulation
7	Final signature submission to county elections officials	By end of 180-day window
8	County signature verification (random sample, then full count if needed)	Up to ~60 days
9	Secretary of State certifies qualification	After county verification
10	Measure qualifies for next statewide General election held at least 131 days after certification	Election day

Critical rule. Per SB 202 (2011), **citizen initiative measures can appear only on a statewide General election ballot, not a primary.** To qualify, the measure must be certified at least 131 days before the General election.

REFERENDUMS

A referendum allows voters to repeal a statute recently enacted by the Legislature. Referendums are far less common than initiatives and operate on a much shorter timeline.

SUBJECT MATTER LIMITS

A referendum may not be used against:

- Urgency statutes
- Statutes calling elections
- Statutes providing tax levies or appropriations for current state expenses

REFERENDUM TIMELINE

#	Stage	Timing
1	Bill signed into law by Governor	Day 0
2	Proponent requests circulating title and summary from Attorney General	Within the 90-day window
3	Attorney General issues circulating title and summary	Within 10 days of request
4	Signature circulation, gathering, and submission to county officials	Must be completed within 90 days of bill enactment
5	County verification, then Secretary of State certification	Following submission
6	Statute is suspended once the referendum qualifies, pending the vote	From qualification to election
7	Vote at next statewide election held at least 31 days after qualification	Election day

Key contrast with initiatives. Referendum proponents have only 90 days total from enactment of the bill, compared with 180 days of circulation for initiatives. The Attorney General has 10 days (not roughly 65) to produce the title and summary. Unlike citizen initiatives, a referendum may appear on either a Primary or a General election ballot, whichever statewide election is next held at least 31 days after qualification.

INITIATIVE VS. REFERENDUM: SIDE-BY-SIDE

Element	Citizen Initiative	Referendum
Purpose	Adopt new statute or constitutional amendment	Repeal a recently enacted statute
Signatures required	Statute: 546,651 (5%) Constitutional Amendment: 874,641 (8%)	546,651 (5%)
AG title and summary timing	Approximately 65 days (50 days for concurrent review/fiscal estimate + 15 days for AG)	10 days from request
Circulation window	Up to 180 days from issuance of title and summary	90 days total from bill enactment
Lead time before election	Must qualify at least 131 days before General election	Must qualify at least 31 days before next statewide election
Eligible ballot	Citizen-led: General election only (per SB 202)	Next statewide Primary or General election
Effect on underlying law	Takes effect if approved (5 days after certification)	Statute is suspended once qualified, repealed if voters reject it
Legislative role	Public hearings required at 25% threshold; cannot amend or block	No formal legislative role after enactment

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT VS. STATUTE (INITIATIVES)

Element	Constitutional Amendment	Statute
Signatures required	874,641 (8% of last gubernatorial vote)	546,651 (5% of last gubernatorial vote)
25% trigger threshold	218,661	136,663
Vote needed to pass	Simple majority of voters	Simple majority of voters
Eligible ballot (citizen-led)	Statewide General election only	Statewide General election only
Eligible ballot (legislatively placed)	Primary or General (requires 2/3 vote of each house)	Primary or General
How it can later be changed	Only by another vote of the people	Legislature may amend or repeal only if the initiative permits, or by another vote of the people
Where it sits in the legal hierarchy	Part of the California Constitution; supersedes conflicting statutes	California statutory law; subordinate to the Constitution

Withdrawal provisions. Proponents of an initiative also have the option to withdraw their measure before it goes to the ballot, even after they have gathered signatures. An initiative that has gathered enough valid signatures becomes eligible for the ballot, but it is not locked in until the Secretary of State certifies it as qualified. That certification happens on the 131st day before the General Election. For example that falls on June 25, 2026 for the November 3, 2026 election. Proponents may withdraw the measure any time before then, by 5 p.m. on that date. Once the measure is certified on June 25, it is set for the ballot and can no longer be removed.

CITIZEN-LED VS. LEGISLATIVELY PLACED MEASURES

The Legislature can place its own measures on the ballot under Article XVIII of the California Constitution and the Government Code. Compared with citizen initiatives, legislatively placed measures bypass signature gathering but face a higher internal vote threshold. They also enjoy **broader ballot eligibility**: the Legislature may choose either a Primary or a General election, whereas citizen initiatives are restricted to the General election ballot.

Element	Citizen-Led Initiative	Legislatively Placed Measure
Path to the ballot	Signature gathering by registered voters	Approval by 2/3 of both Senate and Assembly (for constitutional amendments and bonds)
Signature requirement	5% (statute) or 8% (constitutional amendment) of last gubernatorial vote	None
Eligible ballot	General election only (since SB 202, 2011)	Primary OR General election
Subject scope	Single-subject rule applies	Single-subject rule applies
AG title and summary	Required (about 65 days, includes 30-day public review)	Not required in the same form; title set through legislative process
Public hearings	Required at 25% signature threshold	Standard committee process through the Legislature
Examples	Local Taxpayer Protection Act; CA Voter ID Act; Middle Income New Homebuyer Act (Hertzberg)	ACA 13 (voting thresholds); SCA 1 (recall reform); SB 42 (Fair Elections Act of 2026)

The practical takeaway. If C.A.R. or any sponsor wants a measure on a Primary ballot, the only available route is a legislative placement (or in narrow cases a referendum on a recently enacted statute). **Citizen initiatives default to General elections.**

RECALL

Any state officer may be recalled. These include the elected offices of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Controller, Attorney General, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Insurance Commissioner, Members of the State Board of Equalization, State Legislators, and Justices of the Courts of Appeal and the State Supreme Court. A state officer appointed in lieu of election or to fill a vacancy may also be recalled. The Constitution requires the Legislature to provide for the recall of local officers; counties and cities with their own charter recall provisions follow those instead.

SIGNATURE THRESHOLDS FOR STATE-LEVEL RECALLS

Office	Signature requirement
Statewide officer (Governor and other constitutional officers)	12% of the last vote for that office; signatures from each of at least 5 counties equaling 1% of the last vote for the office in that county
State Senator, Assembly Member, Board of Equalization member, appellate or supreme court justice	20% of the last vote for that office





CALIFORNIA
ASSOCIATION
OF REALTORS®



CAR.ORG