

Time to reform unwieldy process prone to fraud

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Arizona's initiative process is cumbersome, error prone and vulnerable to fraud. It needs an urgent overhaul.

Secretary of State Jan Brewer, now on the verge of becoming governor, said so in the fall as she was dealing with an avalanche of petitions and record levels of questionable signatures.

The state Supreme Court, which had to rule on several measures, called on the Legislature to thoroughly re-examine the process.

And Gov. Janet Napolitano used part of her farewell State of the State address to lay out proposed changes in initiatives and referendums.

Last year's election highlighted some glaring flaws:

- Ever-higher thresholds on the number of required signatures. The requirement, based on voter turnout at the previous gubernatorial election, rose 25 percent from 2006 to 2008.

- Tight time frames. State and county officials have trouble meeting the deadline to verify signatures. Early voting means ballots must be printed earlier than ever. That leaves almost no time for judicial review. It's almost impossible to appeal a decision disqualifying petitions.

- Pay by signature. More and more, initiative campaigns rely on paid circulators, who are paid by the signature. That just opens the door to fraud and abuse. Both Brewer and Napolitano want an end to the pay-by-signature system. We should also look at how to prevent special-interest groups from buying their way on to the ballot. In recent years, there has been an unfortunate proliferation of ballot measures, taking issues to voters that would be best and most flexibly addressed by the Legislature.

On the flip side, the current initiative process tripped up two vitally important measures that should have gone before voters in November: a statewide transportation plan and a package of reforms for state trust land.

Only 23 other states have an initiative process allowing citizens to gather signatures to put proposed legislation or state constitutional amendments on the ballot. A drawback to using initiatives to write laws in Arizona is the lack of flexibility

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because they cannot be changed in virtually any way without another vote. The Legislature has tinkered with initiatives. Now, it's time for a complete checkup, followed by a major repair job.

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