Petition Management

Current practices with hope for automated enhancements

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Using modern technology Election Officials could streamline current methods, and move away from tedious manual processes.

Initiative and referendum processes were established to allow citizens the capability to be directly involved in the political process. While the process has been improved throughout modern society; the essential practice of signature and address verification is still a very manual process. With today's technology jurisdictions need the capability to modernize the stressful validation practice to increase efficiency, and ultimately save money and resources.

This white paper will touch on initiative requirements from the petition onset, and why the need for petition management software is necessary.

You see them when you make a trip to the grocery store, in front of the Post Office, or even in front of your local hardware depot. Although they are not selling delicious cookies or popcorn, circulators are soliciting your attention to collect petition signatures.

In most states, petitioners have a limited amount of time during which they are allowed to gather necessary signatures. Although some states have a year or more to collect signatures for initiative purposes; in others, time is of the essence ranging from 60 days in Massachusetts to four years in Florida[1].

And that is just a sample. Depending on your state and its constitution it is interesting the amount of various petitions allowed within your state's jurisdiction or even compared to others.

Twenty-six states (28 counting the District of Columbia and the insular U.S. Virgin Islands) are Petition states; meaning they may allow a variety of Initiative, Referendum or Constitution Amendments with the use of petitions[2]. The remaining 24 have none outside of the use of petitions to establish political parties, candidate petitions, and the power to impanel grand juries via petition; and even those methods also vary from state to state.

Although most states have both statutory and constitutional initiative processes, there is sometimes a higher signature threshold to qualify constitutional initiatives, except in Colorado, Massachusetts and Nevada. There are other provisions such as geographical distribution requirements requiring signatures to be gathered from multiple parts of a state, thus preventing petitioners from only collecting in denser populated areas[3].

Did you know?

Voter turnout in states with an initiative on the ballot is approximately 3 to 8 percent higher than states without an initiative on the ballot.

Decades with the highest number of statewide initiatives on the ballot	# Proposed	# Adopted	Passage Rate
1991-2000	389	188	48%
1911-1920	293	116	40%
1981-1990	271	115	42%

Decades with the lowest number of statewide initiatives on the ballot	# Proposed	# Adopted	Passage Rate
1901-1910	56	25	45%
1961-1970	87	37	41%
1951-1960	1114	45	39%

States with the highest number of statewide initiatives on the ballot	# Proposed	# Adopted	Passage Rate
Oregon	325	115	36%
California	279	98	35%
Colorado	183	65	36%
North Dakota	168	76	45%
Arizona	154	64	42%

Data and Table from BallotPedia.org[4]
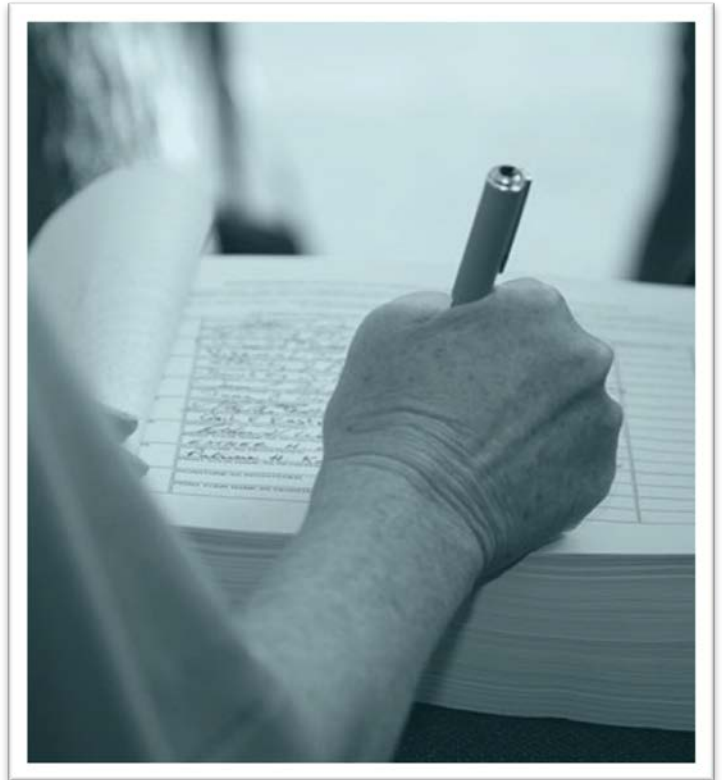
Petition Technology

A Although lawful modifications have been made over time regarding the signature gathering process, not much has changed with respect to the validation of signatures collected.

During the Progressive era in American history (1890-1920), initiative and referendum processes were developed and aimed to allow citizens the capability to become directly involved in the political process. By doing so, this restored equilibrium as a precautionary measure against monopolistic powers of corporations and various forms of trusts. This antiquated process, although deep-rooted as an American tradition has not seen much change in the essential practice of signature and address verification, which for the most part is still a very manual process.

One of the more tedious, time-consuming and costly tasks that election officials must perform is the verification of names and signatures for petitions. With a shortened time frame for validation to take place, jurisdictions find themselves in a petition gauntlet where resources and time interchangeably pull on budgets; furthermore, jurisdictions cannot afford subpar efficiency with the scrutiny of the media in today's click bait society. And yet election officials are unpleasantly forced to make do with what they have.

Combing through hundreds of thousands of names and signatures, the verification process is manually intensive. Most statewide and local election divisions are short-st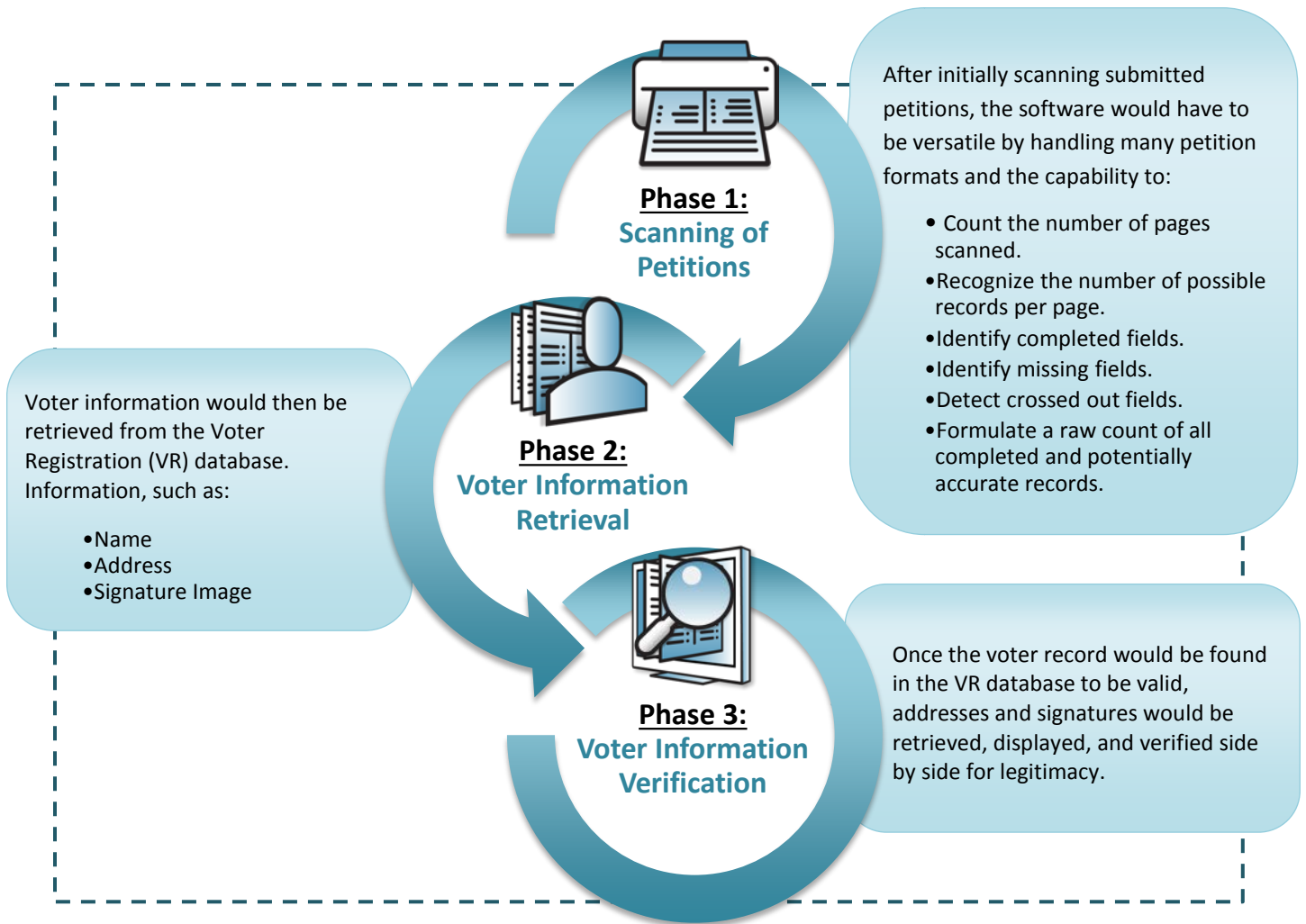affed, and simultaneously circulate and collect signatures within the same period. Election officials are besieged with verifying collected signatures from multiple campaigns in addition to statewide initiatives. All these hundreds of thousands of signatures are collected and must go through verification in a short timeframe; the overflow and stress officials operate under is exponential and well deserving of an improved automated process that can assist in the signature and address verification process.

With today's technology, a new advancement would enhance the verification process and improve procedures with accuracy and ease, ultimately shortening the number of resources and time utilized saving jurisdictions money.

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Ideally, this newly innovative software would be broken down into three basic phases:

Phase 1:
Scanning of Petitions

After initially scanning submitted petitions, the software would have to be versatile by handling many petition formats and the capability to:

- Count the number of pages scanned.
- Recognize the number of possible records per page.
- Identify completed fields.
- Identify missing fields.
- Detect crossed out fields.
- Formulate a raw count of all completed and potentially accurate records.

Phase 2:
Voter Information Retrieval

Voter information would then be retrieved from the Voter Registration (VR) database. Information, such as:

- Name
- Address
- Signature Image

Phase 3:
Voter Information Verification

Once the voter record would be found in the VR database to be valid, addresses and signatures would be retrieved, displayed, and verified side by side for legitimacy.

It is important to note, an essential requirement of the application would require capabilities to integrate with any VR database for comparison of all signatures and addresses aimed for successful verification. Additionally, placing petition information into the VR database for updating and random selection would be a must.

If jurisdictions were able to use advanced technology with signature and address recognition, Election Officials would streamline current processes with accuracy and ease, breaking away from the tedious manual processes. Furthermore, automating the validating process would strengthen America's democratic practices and contribute to the improvement of transparency and auditability.

Works Cited

[1] "Petition Circulation Periods." National Conference of State Legislatures. 2016. 26 June. 2016.
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[3] "Petition Circulation Periods." National Conference of State Legislatures. 2016. 26 June. 2016.
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[4] "History of initiative and referendum in the U.S" Ballotpedia, the Encyclopedia of American Politics. 2016. 26 June.
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