

Voter Education Project fights petition fraud

Last month the streets of Oregon teemed with initiative circulators cruising the Christmas shopping crowds for signatures. But they weren't alone. Joining them were members of the Voter Education Project.

The new project is a non-profit organization headed by Jeannie Berg, a veteran of the ballot initiative system who, among other things, worked on the successful 1996 campaign to increase the state's minimum wage. She says that paying signature gatherers (or "dealers" as she calls them) by the bounty system has had a corruptive effect on Oregon politics.

"Think about it," she says. "A signature dealer gets money every time you sign. That's a mighty high temptation for fraud."

The Voter Education Project will be on the streets through the signature-gathering season that ends in July 2002. It receives funding from public and private labor unions and other sources, and the Oregon AFL-CIO is coordinating a supplemental volunteer effort from its membership statewide.

The mission is to educate voters that they can demand honest and full disclosure from anyone who asks for their signature on a ballot measure. In other words, you can't be too careful.

Already the Oregon Department of Justice has pursued two cases of election fraud committed by signature dealers, thanks in part to complaints filed by the Voter Education Project.

The first resulted in the prosecution of Paul Frankel, an Alabama man who allegedly used a "bait and switch" technique. He had a fake petition that called for lowering gas taxes which he kept on the top of his clipboard at Lloyd Center Mall in Portland. After people signed it, he would tell them that they had to "verify" their signature by signing all the pages underneath. What the signers didn't know is that he had fooled them into unwittingly signing real petitions.

Additionally, Frankel forged the signature of a Department of Justice investigator on initiatives that were later found in the office of Bill Sizemore, executive director of Oregon Taxpayers United.

In December, the AG's office also issued a warrant for the arrest of James Gurga, who worked with Frankel.

Attorney General Hardy Myers said during the press conference on the warrant, "Elections law violations and the placing of fraudulent signatures on petitions are very personal violations of Oregon's democratic process."

Secretary of State Bill Bradbury agrees.

"Citizen initiatives are a very important part of Oregon's political process," he says. "However, cases like this highlight the fact that some dishonest signature gatherers are taking advantage of Oregon voters."

The Voter Education Project will use field workers to spread the word on the street, and you can help. When you see a paid signature dealer anywhere in Oregon, call the Project at 1-800-295-5597 so an educator can be sent to the scene.

"We're passing out fliers to voters where we see paid signature gatherers with the message to 'Think Before You Ink.' We will also be at public events like concerts or rallies," said Berg. "We'll be out there, trying to educate as many voters as we can."

Q&A: Voter Education

What kinds of fraud do signature gatherers engage in?

Everything from blatant forgery to misleading voters. Already this signature-gathering season, two signature gatherers have been indicted for signature- gathering felonies by the state attorney general's office.

How can I protect myself from being victimized?

According to an alert issued by Secretary of State Bill Bradbury last month, you should never sign an initiative you haven't read carefully, and you should always fill out your entire name and address when signing a petition. Bradbury recommends that potential signers "treat their signature like they treat their vote."

How can I help prevent fraudulent signatures?

For starters, you can call the Voter Education Project at 1-800-295-5597 as soon as you see a signature gatherer. You can sign up as a volunteer through the Oregon AFL-CIO (see sidebar) to educate potential signers to "think before they ink."

If I see a petitioner, should I block people from signing?

"Absolutely not," says Jeannie Berg, executive director. "The goal is to educate signers to think for themselves so they won't be tricked into signing something they don't understand. But under no circumstances should anyone prevent a person from signing a petition that they want to sign."

Should union members volunteer for the Voter Education Project?

Union members are already forming a supplemental project to further the reach and impact of this important work. Contact Jennifer Sargent at the Oregon AFL-CIO (503-585-6320 in Salem, or 503-224-3169 in Portland) or Cornelia Murphy at AFSCME (503-239-9858) to join the union volunteer effort.

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