



Citizen Initiative Advantages & Disadvantages

Advantages

Throughout the Study Team's work, we examined many possible advantages and disadvantages of CI and its implementation in other states. We chose Alabama's position, in part, because it directly addresses many of these points.

1. Citizen Initiative (CI) provides a tool to address government recalcitrance, self-interest, or gridlock
 - CI lets voters make decisions on public policy issues which the legislature refuses to address or is unable to resolve.
 - CI may be the only way to achieve government structural change that the legislature and the governor resist.
 - Initiatives, like term limits and clean elections, directly affect legislators, so provide a check on their self-interest.
 - CI provides a way of unpacking the range of choices offered by political parties, allowing voters to separate out their preferences from the packaged platforms of the parties.
 - Balanced input from citizens can break gridlock, allow factions in government to compromise, and enable agencies to change direction.
2. Provide a counterweight to the power of lobbyists
 - Citizen Initiative provides a balance to the power of professional lobbyists in the legislative process.
 - CI gives voice to ordinary citizens, counteracting the tendency of elected representatives to put the interests of privileged elites over those of ordinary citizens.
3. Citizen Initiative is a way to address social change
 - CI can force difficult issues onto the political agenda.
 - CI is an opportunity for the public to make policy in an area where public opinion is moving but the legislature is not.

4. Benefits to citizenship and Democracy

- Direct participation can enable citizens to become more engaged in public life.
- Voters are reminded, when accosted by signature collectors, of their roles and responsibility in self-government.
- Direct Democracy is an expression of “popular sovereignty” – the right of citizens to decide on matters of fundamental importance without mediation by representatives. This can be important symbolically or necessary for legitimization of key decisions.
- By involvement in CI campaigns, voters can gain skills leading to active citizenship, become citizen-experts on the issue, and both learn from and inform government representatives.
- CI stimulates citizen interest in public policy.
- Public opinion polls in states with CI consistently show that voters like it. • No state’s citizens have ever reversed their decision to implement CI.

5. Strategic advantages

- Citizen Initiative directly constrains legislators and governors by enacting policies or proposing measures to limit the choices available to lawmakers.
- The threat of a CI may indirectly influence lawmakers to alter policy choices to avert a ballot measure.
- CI allows for the public endorsement of a new policy and can settle controversies in an authoritative way.
- Citizen Initiative can be used to build public acceptance and cooperation with policies.

Disadvantages

1. Public education issues

- Some voters may not be well informed.
- A large amount of knowledge is needed on the part of the public. When issues are obscure or complex, the legislature has the advantage of being able to bargain and expertise is available.
- The decline in local newspapers limits the amount of information available to the public, especially about local issues. Social media news does not have the advantage of an editor to provide judgment.
- Professional signature gatherers may not be knowledgeable about the issues and do not exchange much information on the pros and cons. • CI campaigns are sometimes misleading or false.

2. Money issues and special interests

- Large amounts of money needed for signature campaigns are often provided by PACs and other political groups.
- The agenda is set by groups that can afford the high cost of signature gathering.
- Those with money and resources may promote their own interests through CI, and special interests can exploit the process.
- Bad policies can result if the process is heavily influenced by interest groups.
- Out of state groups can target smaller states for initiatives they favor, creating a “cheap win” that provides a take-off point for campaigns in other states.

3. Polarization

- The CI process encourages single-issue politics and simplistic proposals.
- Reducing an issue to a yes/no proposition can cause nuance to be lost, thus limiting opportunities for compromise and increasing polarization.

4. Structural issues. Each CI is time-consuming and costly, leading to delays in policy implementation and possibly reducing funds available for implementation.

- When strict rules limit the ability of the legislature to change an initiative after enactment, it is hard to correct unintended consequences. • Many questions on the ballot may overwhelm voters.
- Incompatible initiatives can result in a lack of policy coherence, and too many can overload the system.