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Ditch the Ink. Wet Signatures Strangle Democracy



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Ballot initiatives and public petitions have long been the raw expression of popular will in American democracy. These tools give everyday citizens the power to propose laws, challenge entrenched interests, and compel action where legislatures refuse to lead. But in 2025, it is absurd that many states still insist on “wet” signatures, signatures executed in ink, on paper, in person, as the exclusive proof of a citizen’s support for an idea that might appear on a ballot. This insistence on archaic paperwork is an assault on civic engagement that privileges inconvenience over inclusion and fetishizes antiquated technology at the expense of the democratic spirit.

Consider what petition campaigns demand today. Volunteers stand on busy street corners in scorching sun or freezing cold, clutching stacks of paper. They coax busy commuters to pause for a moment, to read sometimes complicated language, to physically sign a page that will then be carried into county offices and reviewed with near-microscopic scrutiny. Supporters often discover later that their names were never counted because of a tiny error on the sheet, a misaligned date, or a circulator’s missed notary stamp. Whole pages of signatures can be invalidated because of a trivial formatting issue that had nothing to do with whether people genuinely supported the initiative. The person who cared enough to stop and sign may never even learn their support was thrown out.

In too many jurisdictions, elections officials and regulators have turned the act of supporting an initiative into a labyrinthine obstacle course. Even when people follow every instruction, the state can still reject signatures on grounds so arcane that only lawyers thrive in the weeds. Postal boxes may not count as addresses on petitions even though they are acceptable for other official uses. Entire pages can be discarded for a clerical error by someone gathering signatures, entirely unrelated to the intent of the individuals who signed.

It is easy to authenticate an individual signature in the digital age. States issue drivers’ licenses with enhanced real-ID standards. Voter registration rolls are maintained in secure databases. Banks, insurers, and government services accept digital signatures and multi-factor identity verification routinely. Why should the loudest expression of citizen voice, support for a ballot initiative, be the most resistant to modernization?

We have technology today that can do a better job of ensuring authenticity and eliminating fraud than handwritten signatures ever could. Secure electronic signatures with verified identity credentials are already widely used for legal and financial transactions. Remote identity verification, two-factor authentication, and encrypted records can ensure that only eligible voters sign a petition and that each signature is unique and verifiable. Blockchain and other distributed-ledger technologies can create tamper-proof logs of petition activity. These tools make cursive look obsolete and dangerously exclusionary.



Electronic voting systems are sometimes treated with suspicion, but electronic petition signatures are about recording consent and interest, something that can be done both securely and transparently with today's tools.

The refusal to accept modern verification implicitly favors campaigns with deep pockets that can afford armies of paid circulators and can manage the slow and expensive logistics of printing, transporting, and reviewing paper. Grassroots efforts without big funding are left scrambling, their supporters facing barriers that amount to bureaucratic attrition. A retiree with mobility issues might have every desire to support a petition but no practical way to do so in person. A working parent may not have time in their lunch break to encounter a signature gatherer with a clipboard. Requiring wet signatures erects a toll booth in front of the First Amendment right to petition the government. It forces citizen activism into a pre-internet straitjacket while every other part of life embraces convenience and efficiency.

When lawful, authenticated electronic signatories become the standard, officials will be better equipped to focus on legitimate concerns rather than mechanical nitpicking. Technical certification assures that every verified voter's support is counted without bias, without requiring physical presence, and without arbitrary dismissal because a petition circulator forgot to include a date or misplaced a line.

Democracy thrives on accessibility. It stumbles under weighty procedural barriers that favor the already powerful and well-resourced. Requiring wet signatures in the digital age is to say that the default mode of civic engagement should be slow, inefficient, and inaccessible. That is simply wrong.

Allowing electronic signatures on ballot petitions is an overdue reform that aligns civic infrastructure with contemporary reality. It honors the will of the people, raises participation, and ensures that democracy does not get bogged down in the relics of ink and paper. The right to petition should be as easy to exercise in practice as it is in principle. The time to abandon the fetish for wet signatures is now.





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