



STATE OF MICHIGAN  
BUREAU OF ELECTIONS  
LANSING

## Sampling Procedure for Canvassing Petitions

On February 7, 1980, the Board of State Canvassers adopted the following procedure for canvassing petitions seeking an initiative, referendum, or state constitutional amendment.<sup>1</sup>

First, staff conduct a "face review" of all petition sheets. Face review involves checking that the mandatory elements of each petition sheet are present and correct, which is also done for candidate nominating petitions.<sup>2</sup> Sheets that do not pass face review are removed from the petition.<sup>3</sup> After face review, staff count the total number of potentially valid signatures on all remaining sheets and stamp an identifying number on each sheet.

After face review, counting of signatures and sheets, and stamping of sheets, staff begin the two-step random sampling process. A sample of approximately 500 signatures is randomly selected from the remaining potentially valid signatures. Each of those signatures is examined to confirm that the signatory is a person registered to vote in Michigan, that the signature on the petition sheet matches the signature contained in the Qualified Voter File (QVF), and that the entry does not contain another fatal defect (for instance, a jurisdiction, date, or address error). Each of the signatures in the sample is determined to be either a valid signature (the genuine signature of a person registered to vote in Michigan that matches the information in QVF) or an invalid signature (because the person who signed the petition sheet is not registered to vote in Michigan, the signature did not match the person's signature stored in the QVF, or for another fatal defect). Finally, staff tallies the number of signatures in the sample which are valid.

When selecting and checking the validity of the approximately-500-signature sample during the first step of the sampling process, staff use a computer software program to provide a randomly generated list of sheets and lines.<sup>4</sup> A statistical methodology approved by the Board of State Canvassers calculates two thresholds based on the number of valid signatures in the sample: a "rejection" threshold and an "acceptance" threshold. The rejection and acceptance threshold are not the same. Instead, the rejection threshold is usually fifteen to thirty signatures lower than the acceptance threshold.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Random Sample Signature Canvassing in Michigan*, Michigan Department of State (1990), which is also available on the Board of State Canvassers page of [Michigan.gov/elections](http://Michigan.gov/elections).

<sup>2</sup> Mandatory elements include ensuring that the paid or volunteer checkbox is completed, that the county of circulation is indicated or apparent from the cities and townships indicated on the petition, and that the circulator certificate is properly completed.

<sup>3</sup> Staff also remove sheets if every signature affixed to the sheet is obviously invalid (for example, if every signature line omitted the date, city, or some other mandatory element).

<sup>4</sup> The sample is always at least 500 signatures but may not be exactly 500 signatures because staff requests that the computer program initially list more than 500 sheets and lines, based on staff's experience that some identified lines will be blank and that additional sheet and lines will be needed to complete the sample. For example, the computer program may identify 800 sheets and lines because staff anticipate that approximately 300 will be blank, but in fact only 250 turn out to be blank, leaving a sample of 550 signatures.

To complete the first step of the canvassing process, staff compare the number of valid signatures in the sample to the rejection and acceptance thresholds. If the number of valid signatures in the sample is equal to or greater than the acceptance threshold, staff recommend that the Board certify the subject of the petition to the ballot. If the number of valid signatures in the sample is lower than or equal to the rejection threshold, staff recommend that the Board decline to certify the subject of the petition to the ballot. If the number of valid signatures in the sample is greater than the rejection threshold, but lower than the acceptance threshold, staff move to the second step of the canvassing process.

The second and final step of the petition canvassing process is employed only when the number of valid signatures falls into the span between the acceptance and rejection thresholds—the “pull more” range. This step is largely similar to the first step, except that staff uses the same approved methodology to randomly sample approximately 2,000 signatures, and staff calculate a single combined acceptance and rejection threshold (without a “pull more” range). The larger sample of newly drawn signatures is combined with the approximately 500 signatures in the original sample to yield a combined sample of approximately 2,500 signatures.

Staff determine how many signatures in the combined sample are valid and compare the number of valid signatures to the acceptance/rejection threshold. If the number of valid signatures in this larger random sample is greater than or equal to the computed acceptance/rejection threshold, staff recommends that the Board certify the subject of the petition to the ballot. If the number of valid signatures in the sample is lower than the acceptance/rejection threshold, staff recommends that the Board decline to certify the subject of the petition to the ballot. This second step, which is usually not required, is used by the Board in its established procedures to obtain a more precise estimate of valid signatures, based on a larger sample size, in cases of close calls—where an initiative fails to reach the acceptance threshold by a small margin. Although even a small margin in the sample would likely yield the correct result when extrapolated to the “universe” of submitted signatures, the second step is an additional safeguard used to increase the precision of the sample and the accuracy of the result.