

What is the Citizens Initiative Review Commission?

The Oregon Citizens Initiative Review Commission (CIRC) was established by House Bill 2634, which was signed into law in 2011, in order to permanently oversee the Citizens Initiative Review (CIR). The Commission is made up of former CIR panelists, moderators, and citizens appointed by the governor as [described in ORS 250.137](#).

What is the Citizens Initiative Review?

The [Citizens Initiative Review](#) (CIR) is a program designed by Healthy Democracy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that informs the voting population about ballot measures through a citizen-driven deliberative process. The CIR uses stratified, random sampling in order to gather a group of twenty to twenty-five citizens that is representative of the Oregon electorate along several demographic characteristics such as age, race, gender, political party, education level and geography. In this way, the citizen panel resembles the population that is eligible to vote on the measure. In order to ensure that citizens of all demographics have an opportunity to participate on a review panel, they are provided compensation for transportation and childcare, as well as compensation for each day of the program. In Oregon, this compensation has been approximately the daily average wage of Oregon workers.

The CIR lasts four days, and throughout those days panelists hear from advocates for and against the measure, and are given the opportunity to question the advocates as well as independent subject experts, and deliberate amongst themselves about the measure and its implications. After hearing arguments on both sides as well as expert testimony, the panelists deliberate on the merits of the information presented and then collectively write the Citizens' Statement containing what they feel is the most strong and reliable information about the ballot initiative. All panelists vote on the information and phrasing that is included in the final statement. The Citizen Statement is then printed in the Oregon Voter's Pamphlet, which is mailed by the Secretary of State's office to all registered voters in the state prior to the election.

The CIR [has evolved](#) in small ways since its first demonstration in 2010, however, the main essence and overall structure has remained the same.

Why is there a need for the CIR?

Referenda and initiatives give voters the ability to vote directly on public policy issues that get enacted into law aside from the legislative process. [Many votes](#), however, are cast without a solid understanding of the measures and their potential impact. Ballot measures can be complex. For example they could contain several policy changes in one measure or have complicated scientific or economic policy language. There may also be misleading or one-sided campaigning that could further contribute to misunderstandings about the measures among voters. The CIR's end product, the Citizens' Statement, is a single page of information created by a panel comprised of ordinary citizens who help voters understand confusing measures and make better informed voting decisions. The Citizen's Statement is unique because it offers voters analyses and opinions from their fellow citizens, which voters may find to be more trustworthy and informative than paid advertisements from advocates for and against the measures.

What does the CIR Commission do?

The CIR Commission chooses which measures will be reviewed during every general election cycle. The commission is required by HB2634 to select measures that seem as though they will have the largest impact on the state budget, or measures that will change the state constitution. The bill, [passed in 2011](#), also established the CIR Commission, as well as the CIR as a permanent program.

The Commission also oversees the CIR to ensure that the procedure is nonpartisan and neutral. It is essential that advocates on both sides get equal time to present information and be questioned by panelists, so that the panelists may obtain all necessary information before deliberating on the benefits and drawbacks of the measures. Moderators must also remain neutral in order to ensure that the process is effective, evenhanded, and valuable to voters.

Is the CIR effective? Does it have an impact on ballot measure elections?

The CIR [has been studied](#) and scrutinized each legislative cycle since its initial demonstration in 2010. Independent researchers, funded in part by the National Science Foundation, have found the Citizens' Statement to have a significant impact on those who read it. In comparison with a control group, which did not read the Citizens' Statement, those that did read it were more knowledgeable about the measure, and were more confident in their knowledge.

The CIR itself has been found to be a fair and unbiased process. Researchers have [concluded](#) that the panelists are able to participate in high-level deliberative discussion, and that all voices have an opportunity to be heard. Each implementation of the CIR has been carefully studied and Healthy Democracy has used the findings and recommendations from researchers in order to further improve the process.

Why is the CIR and the CIR Commission valuable?

The CIR gives a voice to ordinary citizens and allows them to participate in a deliberative process that has a real, visible impact on those participants as well as the voters who read the information the panelists produce. The CIR Commission oversees the CIR's implementation, which protects the neutrality of the process and therefore increases trust that the information produced comes directly from citizens participating in a balanced program. The process has been found to have a measureable impact on both voters and the citizen panelists themselves.

What challenges has the CIR faced and how were they overcome?

The CIR has encountered opposition and challenges, primarily due to its status as a democratic reform program that counteracts the influence of money in electoral campaigns. Well-funded interest groups that regularly write ballot measures or promote legislation to be passed through initiatives have been less welcoming of the CIR as it undermines paid advertising and other one-sided methods of persuasion in the public square.

Another challenge the CIR and CIR Commission face is access to funding. The CIR is reliant on funding to maintain a program that is equally accessible to all eligible participants. The CIR provides compensation for the service of citizen panelists to ensure that a diverse group will be able to participate. Although the CIR and CIR Commission are established in state law, there has been no appropriation of public funds for either. Thus, the CIR has been funded by private donations since its inception and Healthy Democracy and the CIR Commission itself have been responsible for finding donors to continue their work.

Why does the CIR Commission require funding?

The CIR Commission uses funding to cover the costs of running the review process, as well as staffing the Commission and the [public meetings](#) the Commission is required to hold by law. As the CIR Commission is comprised of a small group of civic volunteers with a small administrative budget, there are few resources available to them for getting the word out about their work and continuing to have an impact on the initiative process. Adequate funding is important for the CIR because in order to have a representative sample of the population participate, travel, hotel, and meal costs must be covered, as well as reimbursement for the work the panelists perform during the review. Some panelists may require child or eldercare, which the CIR Commission must also cover. This allows those who need it but are unable to pay for it to participate.

Despite its status as a public service, as it stands now, the CIR Commission relies on solely on private donors, which is an increasingly uncertain source of funding.

How has the CIR evolved and expanded?

Based on observations and studies done by researchers on the CIR, some basic changes have been made to its format over the years. The process has been carried out on different scales and in different states. The CIR has been shortened from its initial five days down to four, and panels which originally included twenty-four participants are now comprised of approximately twenty. These changes reduced the cost of holding a CIR and addressed the concerns some panelists expressed about the process being too long. Including a weekend over the four-day review now also allows for the participation of those who are unable to spend five entire days away from the workplace.

Since 2014, the CIR has expanded into four other states as pilot projects, including three local jurisdictions and one international venue (Finland). In 2016, the CIR was carried out at the state level in Arizona, which was also the first CIR to be publicly funded through the Clean Elections Commission. Massachusetts also held a pilot of the CIR in 2016 and legislation has been introduced to have the process officially adopted and funded by the state. In 2018, an unofficial statewide CIR was piloted in California with plans to work for official adoption in the future.