

Ballot Initiative Would Lower Drinking Age Can Collect Signatures

By Sam Smith

A proposed ballot initiative that would lower the minimum legal drinking age in the state from 21 to 18 has been cleared to begin collecting signatures, according to California Secretary of State Alex Padilla.



If it receives enough signatures to qualify for the November 2016 ballot, voters will be able to decide whether 18- to 20-year-olds will be able to legally purchase and consume alcohol beverages in California.

A bill establishing the national minimum drinking age to 21 was passed in 1984.

The measure's proponent, Terrance Lynn, has 180 days — until April 26, 2016 — to collect 365,880 signatures in order for the initiative to qualify for the ballot, Padilla announced last Friday.

Lynn initially sent the proposal to Attorney General Kamala Harris on Aug. 23, 2015, a document on the office's website showed.

On his website, Lynn explained that he proposed the initiative because, "This is about equal rights. 18 year olds have nearly every burden and privilege of adults ... except the right to drink alcohol. This is a misguided aberration from 1984 that should be corrected."

The nonprofit Mothers Against Drunk Driving opposes lowering the legal drinking age. According to the organization, more than 25,000 lives have been saved in the country since it was raised to 21.

"When states had lower legal drinking ages in the U.S., the underage drinking problem was worse. For example, before the 21 minimum legal drinking age was implemented by all states, underage drunk drivers were involved in over twice as many fatal traffic crashes as today," MADD's website stated.

If the drinking age measure does clear the threshold for ballot access, however, it's unclear if it could win. A 2014 Gallup poll found just 25 percent of Americans would support a federal drinking age of 18 and in recent years there's been little political interest in the issue from largely gray-haired politicians who lived through Mothers Against Drunk Driving's successful campaign in the 1980s to force states to criminalize the sale of alcohol to young adults.

All states eventually complied with Congress' 1984 stipulation that they have a drinking age of 21 or lose some federal

highway funds, though the territories Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands continue take the hit and cling to an age of 18, as did Guam until 2010.

California would lose an estimated \$200 million annually in federal highway funds if it lowers the state drinking age, according to a fiscal impact assessment from state officials. There was no specific projection for increased alcohol sales tax revenue.

If it qualifies for the ballot, there's certain to be robust debate about MADD's claims about the drinking age's relation to highway safety. Opponents -- most notable in recent years a coalition of college presidents -- dispute the group's interpretation of a drop in traffic deaths and say prohibition for young adults has made their drinking habits less safe

It would also lead to an increase of state and local tax revenues from the sales of alcoholic beverages, possibly totaling several million dollars each year, the Secretary of State's website stated.

Students contacted for interviews were divided on the issue.

Michael Villagomez said Californians have no reason to lower the drinking age. "I think it's fine at 21. I think if it was younger, maybe young adults may not make the best choices," he said.

Lisa Neglia disagreed, pointing out 18 is considered to be the age when adulthood begins. "I think if we're able to send people to war at 18, they should be able to determine if they can handle alcohol," Neglia said.

One 17-year-old, John Gomez, said keeping the drinking age at 21 gives teens something to look forward to as they grow older.

"I think 21 is a great age for drinking because too many high school students feel free to do whatever they want," Gomez said. "They may try to drink anyway, but the law at least slows them down a bit."

Should the drinking age in California be lowered to 18? Why or why not?