

2 clashing options on death penalty

By Bob Egelko, San Francisco Chronicle

Death-penalty supporters submitted signatures on a ballot measure last month aimed at speeding up executions in California, setting the stage for voters to decide in November whether to retain and overhaul the state's death penalty or abolish it.

Prosecutors, law enforcement groups and victims'-rights advocates turned in 593,000 signatures for the initiative, which would attempt to fix a system plagued by delays and high costs by tightening legal deadlines and requiring more lawyers to take capital cases. Last month, opponents of the death penalty submitted 601,000 signatures for an initiative to repeal capital punishment and replace it with life in prison without parole. Each measure needs 365,880 valid signatures to qualify for the ballot.

A recent Field poll indicated that Californians were closely divided, with 48 percent in favor of speeding up executions and 47 percent preferring to eliminate them. If both measures win majority votes, a provision in the pro-death penalty initiative says only the one receiving more votes would become law. That has been the rule for conflicting ballot measures in the past, but a leader of the campaign to abolish the death penalty argues that a majority vote for the repeal measure would override any vote for the rival proposal.

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