

Is CaliforniansAgainstIdentityTheft a Fraud? You Decide.

August 17, 2011 – Within the past month or so, a series of rather frightening radio advertisements have been airing in California. The ads attempt to convince listeners that they shouldn't sign petitions for ballot measures because those gathering the signatures might steal their information and commit identity theft. But as an organization that deals specifically with the issue of ID theft, we're not aware of any documented cases in California (or anywhere else, for that matter) in which someone's identity theft can be traced directly back to signing a petition. So that makes us wonder if the ad campaign isn't just a cynical fraudulent attempt to scare voters away. And, if so, who could be behind it and why?

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(function() {
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];
s.type = 'text/javascript';
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);
})();
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Californians Against Identity Theft is making a lot of claims about the risks associated with signing petitions for ballot issues in California. Claims like, "California received an "F" grade from the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center for its failure to enact laws that adequately regulate petition gathering." While true, that grade had nothing to do with identity theft. It is also worth noting that the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center is very clear about its political motivations; which are friendly to very liberal causes and unfriendly towards conservative causes. In our opinion, it is hardly an unbiased arbiter.

Or how about the claim, "Every day, thousands of Californians risk exposure to identity thieves every time they sign a ballot petition." Begging the question, "can you name a single case of identity theft nationwide actually caused by signing a petition?"

There are several reasons that we're more than a little skeptical about Californians Against Identity Theft. First and foremost, we can't determine who exactly is backing the organization based on their website. Whoever reserved their web address did so anonymously based on a Whois look-up. Most legitimate organizations don't do this. Their "Contact" link is equally ambiguous at providing any useful information. Anyone clicking on the link will simply create a new e-mail message that is routed to a general mailbox. There is nothing on their site about their board members or officers. Nothing about who funds them. You really need to do a little research to come up with any meaningful information about who is involved with this organization. At the very least, they don't appear to be too proud of who they are or their claims.

Ironically, the primary source of data that this group is using to back their claims (the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center) has taken the position that legitimate causes should be forced to disclose who is funding them. CaliforniansAgainstIdentityTheft discloses nothing about who is funding them. I guess by inference we can only come to the conclusion that they are not a legitimate organization.

Another reason for our skepticism is that under their "Resources" tab there are a number of links; some of them to

legitimate sources of information. But none of those links appear to talk about any cases of identity theft that are linked to signature gathering for ballot measures. If this is a real issue, you would think that they would be pointing to every legitimate news story they could find. The only logical conclusion is that there simply aren't any such stories.

A variety of news and opinion organizations are also skeptical. ABC News posted a report stating that the claims being made about identity theft were "unsubstantiated". Public Broadcasting station KPBS is also questioning the legitimacy of the group. The KPBS report clearly states that group is backed by labor unions. And earlier this month, the organization finally filed with the state as a campaign committee. The president of the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, a labor union organization, Bob Balgenorth told the Sacramento Bee that he was involved in coming up with the idea for the group. That brings up the question of why these unions would want to prevent voters from exercising their right to sign a petition?

According to LaborUnionReport, there are a number of ballot measures that have already qualified for signature gathering in California that are not friendly to labor unions. It is no secret that California and a number of its municipalities are facing tough financial conditions. To date, the state and many municipalities have resisted efforts to deal with issues regarding public employee unions and their pensions. But among the initiative issues that certain organizations are trying to get on the ballot are measures that would require public employees to contribute more to their pensions plans, remove new public employees from guaranteed benefit plans, require public employees to work longer before they can qualify for public pensions and change the age required for retirement. There is not a public employee union in the country that really wants voters to have a say in these issues. And even in California there is a lot of polling data that shows voters want to see these issues dealt with.

The bottom line here is that CaliforniansAgainstIdentityTheft appears to be using the threat of identity theft to frighten people in such a way that it prevents them from participating in the political process. It is a despicable tactic regardless of who is doing it, their political leanings or what their reasons are. Their efforts actually hurt all of the legitimate organizations trying to fight the ever growing problem of identity theft.

Regardless of your personal political leanings, you need to know if you live in California or any other state that allows ballot initiatives, you can feel pretty comfortable that signing a petition is safe.

by Jim Malmberg

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