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December 5, 2018

To: House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee
Cc: House Speaker Ryan Smith
Re: HJR 19, A Threat to Government Accountability

I am a volunteer with the League of Women Voters of Greater Cleveland, and a veteran of the Fair Districts ballot campaign. I write to oppose HJR 19, an unnecessary measure that threatens an important power of the voters of Ohio.

Key provisions of HJR 19 (the 180-day lifespan for signatures and the requirement that signatures for an amendment to the Constitution be submitted in April) guarantee that citizen activists will be unable to use volunteers to gather sufficient signatures to get a measure on the ballot. Only moneyed interests, who can pay signature-gatherers to work in the winter months, will be able accomplish that goal.

There is no valid reason for the 180-day limit on a signature. If a voter is still a registered voter, at the same address, when the petitions are submitted to the Secretary of State, the signature should still be valid. The voter signed; the voter supports the petition. That is all you need to know.

There is no valid reason to require submission of signatures in April. Proponents of the measure have not explained why the current deadline, 125 days before the next general election, is insufficient.

In addition, HJR 19 makes it harder for the voters to seek legislative change by direct action. Under the current Ohio Constitution, a 3% signature total places a measure before the General Assembly; only if the voters want to go straight to the electorate must they need to collect signatures to the 6% total. HJR 19 eliminates this two-step process, meaning that nothing can happen unless voters collect signatures reaching the 5% mark.

Currently some initiatives seek to put legislative-type amendments into the Constitution, specifically because the two processes are about equally difficult, and a constitutional amendment has greater protection from being undercut by the General Assembly. If you truly want to protect the Ohio Constitution from excessive amendment, it makes more sense to encourage direct legislation by (1) reducing the signature totals required and (2) adding a significant – at least 36 month – restriction on General Assembly amendments.

The high turnout in the 2018 election already has substantially increased the signature requirements for any form of voter action in the future. There is no valid, voter-respecting reason for the General Assembly to adopt HJR 19, and threaten an important time-honored right of the Ohio electorate.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine J. LaCroix