

Testimony opposing HJR19

Submitted by Deborah Cooper

Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, Chairman Blessing

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### **HJR 19 WOULD STIFLE CITIZEN VOICES**

*Ballot initiative system not broken; no need to fix*

By early 2017, citizen volunteers from all across Ohio had begun collecting signatures. They did so for many months – at libraries, festivals – any place where they might be likely to interface with their fellow citizens to secure signatures for a fair districts initiative they hoped might end gerrymandering in the state.

Even though public support for this initiative was high, obtaining the requisite number of signatures in the designated time frame required an incredible amount of volunteer time and effort. A compromise among citizen groups and the legislature resulted in the eventual passage of Issue 1 with nearly 70 percent of Ohioans approving. Citizens' voices were heard. Legislators had their say. A compromise was reached, and the Ohio Constitution was not changed.

Had the requirements suggested in HJR19 been in effect in 2017, the state legislature may never have had a reason to take Ohio's citizens seriously.

As was evident with the passage of the redistricting reform bill in May 2018, the threat of a ballot initiative can effectively push legislators to act on an issue of grave importance that might otherwise be ignored.

Since 1950, only 10 of 44 proposed ballot measures have passed. Clearly, citizens are rarely successful in changing the state's constitution. Why? Because the signature requirements currently in place are already steep. And turnout in November 2018 means the requirement will jump from 305,591 to 431,809, an enormous and historically unprecedented 41 percent rise. Given these numbers, wouldn't it make more sense to *lower* the requirement instead?

Raising these requirements even more would stifle the voices of ordinary citizens in favor of big-money interests. Nonprofit groups making heavy use of volunteers would be hindered, since few volunteers are able or willing to collect signatures during the cold months between Oct. 1 and April 1.

Well-heeled interest groups, however, could easily afford to collect the requisite number of signatures by hiring signature collectors. Raising the passing rate to 60 percent would require even more money for a "yes" campaign, again giving the advantage to big-money interests.

Rather than giving ordinary Ohioans a voice, ballot initiatives in an “HJR19 future” would belong to groups with deep pockets and possibly no interest in Ohio citizens.

What about statutory initiatives? HJR19 also dampens direct democracy for statutory initiatives by raising the percentage of required signatures from 3 to 5 percent. Prohibiting the legislature from amending or suspending a citizen statutory initiative for 12 months is not a big enough motivator to compel citizens to choose a statutory initiative over a constitutional initiative.

In essence, HJR19 is a slap in the face to ordinary Ohioans who need and deserve access to direct democracy. I urge you to vote NO on this harmful resolution.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Deborah Cooper  
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