



**Testimony by Claire Wagner, Fair Districts Ohio
Before the Senate General Government Committee on
Senate Bill 153
May 27, 2025**

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Gaverone, Ranking Member Blackshear and members of the Senate General Government Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide opposition testimony on Senate Bill 153.

My name is Claire Wagner and I'm a Cincinnati-area volunteer for Fair Districts Ohio who gathered signatures and organized other west-side petition gatherers who wanted to end gerrymandering. Fair Districts is a non-partisan coalition of grassroots organizations committed to fairer state legislative and congressional maps, working to create a better and more equitable representational democracy. Our thousands of volunteers collected hundreds of thousands of signatures during petition drives as part of Ohio's proud tradition of direct democracy.

I'm sure we will hear a lot today about the harmful effects this bill will have on eligible Ohio voters. The reason I drove two hours is to talk about the impact SB 153 would have on direct democracy and the petition process.

This bill attacks the citizen initiative process, making it more difficult and expensive for Ohio citizens to make our voices heard at the ballot box. And as our members and volunteers know so well, the process is already difficult and expensive!

SB 153 attacks Ohio's citizen-led ballot initiative process in several significant ways.

First, it enacts onerous/nit-picky new requirements that make it harder to successfully gather enough signatures for a ballot initiative. Entire petition booklets will need to be thrown out over insignificant clerical errors or corrections. More signatures will need to be thrown out because of minute mismatches, or because a registration address update was filed after the signature (but before the petition was submitted for certification).

Also, SB 153 changes the rules so that new and updated voter registrations need to have been filed prior to the date the petition is signed rather than by the date the petition is filed. What this would mean in practice is that if interested, a new voter would first have to register or update their address, then go out and find a petition to sign – an unlikely sequence of events.

What's more, the bill puts the burden of determining and matching these dates on the boards of elections staff as they certify the petitions. How exactly they will accomplish this mandate is unknown. Are they supposed to check the registration (or update) date of every signature, and check that against the date the petition was signed? The mind boggles. It is also impossible to determine the purpose of this change – other than of course to simply make it harder to collect signatures.

SB 153 requires “compensated” circulators to wear badges, and defines “compensated” so broadly it even applies to volunteers who receive free pizza or a t-shirt at campaign events. Really?

Finally, SB 153 places petition committee members and petition circulators in legal jeopardy and forces them to waive their rights. These changes are likely to intimidate civically active Ohioans by threatening petition committee members and circulators who may fear politically motivated investigations.

To my mind, Fair Districts volunteers who have stood out in the snow and beating sun to talk to their fellow citizens about ways to make our democracy more balanced and fair – taking part in that democracy, getting educated, taking action, bringing others along – these advocates are the backbone of Ohio's proud tradition of direct democracy. We hope all able citizens would be able to do this, yet SB 153 makes it less likely. Passing legislation that would chill and potentially criminalize citizens' participation in direct democracy is just wrong.

SB 153 would also place even more burdens on the Boards of Elections by making the petition review process even more complicated and arduous – all without additional funding.

Thank you.