

Ohio GOP pushes new rules that voting rights groups say will make it harder to get issues on the ballot

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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- The next time someone asks you to sign a petition, they might be wearing a government-issued badge.

Republicans say voters deserve to know when someone is being paid to gather signatures, and that a badge will make the process more transparent.

“They might see the badge and think, ‘Hey, wait a minute — is there more behind a petition than meets the eye?’” said Republican state Sen. Andrew Brenner of Delaware.

Brenner sponsored [Senate Bill 153](#), a wide-ranging election bill that includes new rules for how citizen-led issues reach the ballot.

Voting rights groups say the changes will make it harder to bring issues before voters. They called it a reaction to Ohioans legalizing marijuana and putting abortion protections in the state constitution in 2023.

“The legislators see direct democracy as a threat to their power,” said League of Women Voters President Jen Miller. “First, they tried to trick Ohioans into voting their rights away in 2023. Next, they required campaigns to verify they have no money from foreign entities, including legal residents of the United States. And now this cumbersome red tape designed to make it harder to get issues on the ballot.”

With little leverage against the Statehouse’s GOP supermajority, progressives are increasingly making their case at the ballot box.

After voters approved the marijuana and abortion questions – and rejected a GOP-backed plan to make amending Ohio’s constitution harder – conservatives began introducing new rules for ballot issues and campaigns.

Citizen-led campaigns already face high hurdles like gathering thousands of signatures from all 88 counties. Lawmakers, by contrast, can vote measures onto the ballot.

If passed, [Senate Bill 153](#) would:

- Require paid circulators to wear a visible badge while collecting signatures.
- The Secretary of State would decide the design.
- Define “paid” as “given, or promised, or has received, any money or other thing of value as consideration for taking the action.”
- Inform circulators they could be subpoenaed to testify or present evidence, even if they reside out of state.
- Paid circulators for all petitions (liquor, zoning, state ballot) would need to list their employer on each petition and write in the number of signatures they collected.
- Petitions could be thrown out if circulators don’t wear badges, sign the wrong section, or if paperwork isn’t filed correctly.

Miller said the bill’s definition of “paid” is too broad. A college intern who believes in a cause and receives a small stipend would wear the same badge as a professional from out of state.

Circulating petitions, she noted, takes time and resources — gas money, walking shoes, clipboards, pens — and those bright T-shirts help voters understand why someone is approaching them.

“Imagine the challenge of getting thousands of volunteers to fill out scarily worded paperwork for T-shirt and pizza,” said Catherine Turcer, executive director at Common Cause Ohio. “[Badges] end up being some kind of weird scarlet letter.”

Supporters of the bill say that’s kind of the point. Requiring a badge, they argue, will help voters better understand who’s behind a petition drive.

“They realize it’s not their neighbor asking you to sign a petition, it’s someone being paid,” said state Sen. Theresa Gavarone, a Wood County Republican and co-sponsor of the bill.

SB 153 would also change some of the rules for people who sign petitions. Signers would need to be registered at their current address the day they sign the petition — not just by the time signatures are submitted.

“One of the things I love about signature campaigns is it’s an opportunity to register more people,” Turcer said. “It’s also an opportunity to remind people why it’s important to vote.”

Her reading of SB 153 is that campaigns would need to register someone one day and circle back a week or so later to sign the petition. She called that task “highly improbable.”

“And it would be such a pain in the neck for the board of elections,” Turcer added.

But Brenner said it’s about “having skin in the game... Why should someone who isn’t a registered voter push for a ballot initiative if they themselves haven’t even bothered to register to vote?”