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Direct democracy: Is ballot access too limited?

PERHAPS it's old school to think citizens ought to find it fairly easy to get questions of taxpayer interest on a statewide ballot. That's the whole idea behind allowing state residents to collect and sign initiative petitions.

Instead, it's a rather cumbersome process – maybe too much so. A group that wants to establish term limits for several statewide officeholders is turning to the courts to make placing state questions on the ballot a bit simpler. Yes on Term Limits Inc. wants a judge to throw out a constitutional requirement that those collecting petition signatures be Oklahoma residents.

Many causes use professional petition circulators to gather signatures. That's a problem here because state law forbids out-of-state residents from collecting signatures on initiative petitions. Last year, the Oklahoma Supreme Court tossed a petition for a Taxpayer Bill of Rights because the effort included signatures gathered by out-of-state circulators.

Maybe at one time there was good reason for requiring petition circulators to be Oklahoma residents. But collecting such signatures is now a business, with organizations moving from state to state to get issues on state ballots. That may seem distasteful or far from the original intent of allowing citizens to take issues straight to the people, but it's reality.

Oklahoma places a substantial burden on those seeking a statewide vote on initiative petition issues. To change state law, petition circulators must gather signatures equal to 8 percent of those who voted for the highest office in the most recent statewide election. A petition for a constitutional amendment requires 15 percent. The signatures must be gathered during a 90-day period.

Even then, the petitions must pass a court review and withstand any challenges. Those steps have felled more than one proposed state question in recent years. **It's worth considering whether our state's process for getting questions on a statewide ballot is so difficult as to thwart – or at least frustrate – democracy.**