

# State panel approves petition aimed at ending gerrymandering

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(Photo: Paul Egan/Detroit Free Press)

LANSING — A group that wants to end political gerrymandering of Michigan election districts says it plans to start collecting signatures immediately after the Board of State Canvassers gave approval today to its petition.

The board approved the form — but not the substance — of the ballot petition in a 4-0 vote following a meeting at the Lansing Center that was packed with supporters of the plan, who burst into loud applause when approval was given.

Thursday's vote was the culmination of a lengthy process of review and revision of the proposal, submitted in late June. State election officials and attorneys said it's one of the most complex ballot proposals ever submitted, because 11 different provisions of the state constitution are affected by it.

"Collection will start right now," Katie Fahey, the group's president, told the Free Press after the meeting. "We're very excited to go and get out into the field," with what is planned to be an all-volunteer effort.

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Voters Not Politicians wants to change the state constitution to create an independent citizen commission to draw political lines, taking the role away from the Legislature.

The group would have to collect close to 316,000 valid signatures to get the proposed constitutional amendment on the November 2018 ballot.

The proposal would establish a 13-member independent citizens commission on which independent voters would have five members, and the two major parties would each have four.

The commission is expected to cost at least an extra \$5.5 million a year, based on a formula by which an amount equal to 25% of the current budget of the Michigan Secretary of State would be appropriated to support its work, said James Lancaster, a Lansing attorney representing Voters Not Politicians. The money to support the commission would be in addition to what the Secretary of State's Office now spends, he said.

Elected officials, lobbyists, party officials and other political insiders would be ineligible to serve on the commission, which would hold public hearings before approving proposed district maps by majority vote, with at least two votes required from each of the three groups represented on the commission.

While county lines and other municipal boundaries now form the building blocks of election districts, the commission would look at other factors, such as "communities of interest," and seek to create districts that are politically competitive.

Drawing of Michigan's electoral districts is now controlled by lawmakers who control the state Legislature, with disputes resolved by the Michigan Supreme Court, whose members run on a nonpartisan ballot but are nominated by state political parties.

Both legislative chambers, the governor's office and the Michigan Supreme Court have been controlled by Republicans in recent years, and groups mostly associated with the Michigan Democratic Party have been pushing for change.

Fahey, who lives in Caledonia near Grand Rapids and works for the Michigan Recycling Coalition, said her group is taking a nonpartisan approach and that changes in redistricting are backed by voters from both parties.

Robert LaBrant, senior counsel at the Republican consulting firm the Sterling Corp. and a former Michigan Chamber of Commerce official with extensive involvement with redistricting efforts in Michigan, said in July the proposal gives considerable influence to a partisan secretary of state, partly by requiring that none of the commissioners have any political experience.

Under the proposal, the redistricting commission would be administered by the Secretary of State's Office, which would carry out roles such as creating and making available application forms for citizens who want to serve on the commission.

Because there will be vacuum of participants who have political expertise and experience, the secretary of state could significantly influence both the selection of the commissioners and how the commission operates, through creation of rules and other means, LaBrant said.

LaBrant said he also sees problems moving away from counties and other municipal lines as the building blocks of election districts in favor of undefined "communities of interest," while also calling for election districts that will be politically competitive. There is an apparent conflict between districts with shared interests and districts that are politically competitive, he said.

"If we think we've got contorted, bizarrely shaped districts now" that would be amplified under the criteria set out in the proposal, LaBrant told the Free Press.

In 2012, Michigan Democrats received 52% of the votes cast for state House, but won 46% of the seats. In 2014, Democrats received 51% of the votes for state House and won 43% of the seats. And in 2016, Democrats received just under 50% of the votes for state House, and again won 43% of the seats.

In congressional races in 2016, Democrats received 47% of the votes, but won just 36% of the seats, records show.

Some analysts say overly partisan districts have contributed to hyper-partisanship in state legislatures and Congress, and an inability for the two parties to work together.

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