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OPINION

Bill would reduce initiative signature fraud

Our view: By prohibiting paying petition circulators by the signature, it would remove incentive to forge names

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

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A House panel did the citizens of Arizona a great service this week by approving a bill that would prohibit paying petition circulators for each signature they submit. If the measure becomes law, it should cut down on growing incidents of fraud related to ballot initiatives.

House Bill 2587, sponsored primarily by Tucson Democrats Phil Lopes and Nancy Young Wright, was approved unanimously by the House Government Committee on Tuesday and now goes to the full chamber.

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We editorialized last summer that the Legislature should outlaw payments to petition circulators based on signatures following what appeared to be rampant fraud related to several initiatives that were trying to make it onto the November ballot.

In 2008, then Secretary of State Jan Brewer, who is now the governor, rejected three initiatives due to insufficient signatures. Two more made it onto the ballot even though they might have had fewer signatures than required by law.

State law requires that initiative supporters get a certain number of signatures to change Arizona's laws

or Constitution.

These days it's common for well-funded initiative campaigns to pay people to gather those signatures. Often organizers pay petition circulators for every signature they get.

"All indications are that paying by signature leads to fraud," Lopes said in a Capitol Media Services story in Wednesday's Star.

Lopes said circulators, some of whom can get paid more than \$3 per signature, may find it easier to copy names and addresses out of a phone book than to actually persuade people to sign petitions.

The most glaring example of possible fraud involved last year's Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona's Economy, or TIME, initiative, which would have hiked the state sales tax by 1 cent per dollar to pay for transportation infrastructure. The TIME coalition had to submit 153,365 valid signatures to get its measure on the ballot. The organization turned in about 260,000 signatures. Even with that wide margin, the initiative was rejected due to a 42 percent error rate in signatures.

Brewer said last year that the TIME signatures had "the largest overall invalid rate that we've seen in Arizona."

Brewer and former Gov. Janet Napolitano had both called for changing the law to outlaw paying circulators by the signature.

Jim Drake, Arizona's assistant secretary of state, told us Friday that his agency is in favor of HB 2587 because it will help reduce fraud. He said similar laws in other states have been upheld by the courts.

"This bill is good for the integrity of our elections," Drake said. "When someone goes to the polls, they have to know that an initiative got onto the ballot properly and its supporters met all statutory requirements in good faith to get it there."

The legislation will not require that all petition circulators be volunteers — but their pay cannot be based on the number of signatures or petitions that they submit.

Another way legislators can improve the initiative process is to change the petition-filing deadline so that the secretary of state and county recorders can have more time to check signatures and, if necessary, deal with court challenges.

We editorialized in November that the deadline should be moved from July to April,

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which would allow three more months for signature checking and legal challenges. However, that's a bill for another day.

We're pleased the Legislature is taking a major step toward reducing election fraud. We urge lawmakers to pass this important measure to heighten the integrity of the initiative process.



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