

Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, members of the committee.

My name is Nick Blessing and I'm here today as a proponent of House Bill 2113.

Today I want to convey to you the following in support of this bill:

1. While having a petition requirement has a noble purpose in making sure that those who seek to establish a new party have some level of support and organization, the current requirement for recognition makes it impracticable for new parties to grow support and develop candidates.
 2. Compared to most of Kansas's neighboring states, we have a much higher petition requirement, especially speaking relatively to our population and number of voters.
 3. Allowing new parties a less strenuous method of gaining recognition will be good for our state's democratic process.
1. I want to start with what the current requirement is. 2% of the total votes cast in the 2018 gubernatorial election is equal to 21,112 signatures. These need to be collected within 180 days for the petition to be valid.

Now, for the petition to be validated by the Secretary of State, you must have 21,112 signatures AFTER many signatures will inevitably be invalidated due to error on the part of the signer or the circulator. It is recommended when collecting signatures that an extra number be collected equal to about one third of the required number.

Thus, practically speaking, the new party will need to collect about 28,000 signatures within the 180 day window.

Please imagine that you are starting a political party. Say, just for example that you have 30 volunteer signature gatherers. Each volunteer would need to collect over 900 signatures. I think that it is clear that this presents a very high burden.

You could also determine this by looking at the last 21 years in which only two parties have gained recognition. In 2011, the Americans Elect Party gained recognition from Kansas, but did not run candidates and ultimately asked to be taken off the ballot. But Americans Elect was not a real party and was able to gain recognition primarily because millions of dollars were spent on paid circulators.

Before that, the last party to be recognized by the state via the petition process was the US Taxpayers Party in 1998.

It is worth noting that since these successful petitions, the requirement has gone up with the higher number of votes cast in gubernatorial elections.

2. If we compare the number of signatures with our neighboring states of Missouri, Colorado, and Nebraska, Kansas's requirement is significantly higher. None of these states have a time limit like Kansas, only a deadline. In both Colorado and Missouri the number of signatures required is

10,000. And Nebraska it is 1% of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election which is equal to 6,980 signatures.

Some states require much less. In Mississippi, no petition is required. Parties only need to submit an application to the state with: names of the members of the state executive committee, names of the chairman and secretary of the committee, names of national committeeman and committeewoman, names of officers, and a statement verifying that the executive committee and all officers were elected. Florida has a similar requirement that does not include a petition.

Taking this into account, if we pass House Bill 2113, Kansas will still have a higher requirement than these states, both due to having a 1 year time limit and requiring that more signatures be collected. But with the reduced standard, the state would now allow more groups to have a fairer attempt to practice their freedom of association and compete with the existing political parties in elections.

3. I want to acknowledge what I consider to be a deficiency in our current elections which I believe would be indirectly mitigated by this change.

In the 2018 general election, 60 out of 125 state house races had only one candidate. Four other state house races would have been uncontested as well if the libertarian party had not had a candidate in the race. In both 2014 and 2016, 48 state house races had only one candidate.

While it is probably inevitable that some of these races will be uncontested, having additional parties that would be incentivized to recruit candidates in these districts would partially fill these gaps so that we will have fewer uncontested elections.

Other than just giving voters more choices in elections, reducing the number of uncontested elections may also have an effect on voter turnout. Some research has indicated that more competition in elections is associated with increased turnout. The following is an excerpt from a Senior Honors Thesis,

The Effect of Electoral Competitiveness on Voter Turnout by Joel Jordan Western Washington University

When all other factors are controlled for, having an uncontested race was associated with a 14.6% drop in turnout. If the five uncontested elections in 2014 were to have any candidate, controlling for all other factors, we would expect to see an extra 365,000 extra voters across the country. Furthermore, elections with only one party saw a 4.5% drop in turnout. If the 91 partially unopposed races in 2014 had a candidate from the opposing party, we would expect to see an extra 2,047,500 voters across the country. Therefore, while we can say that spending does not have a substantial effect, we can say that competition as a whole does. Given a goal of increasing voter turnout, spending would not be as effective at increasing turnout as ensuring that both major parties have a candidate, creating election administrations that make it easier for voters to vote, and reaching out to non-white young voters.