

Ballot access law needs amending now

For years, thousands of Georgians have been denied some of the most basic rights of a democratic society: the rights to run for office and to vote for the candidates of their choice.

They are victims of the dirty little secret of Georgia politics: our state's ballot access laws. These laws, which regulate how third party and independent candidates can get on the ballot, arguably the most severe and restrictive in America.

Georgia's ballot access requirements are so extraordinarily difficult that they virtually guarantee that third party and independent candidates cannot run serious campaigns—or, in most cases, even run at all. In effect, they constitute a conspiracy by the Democrats and Republicans to sew up state politics for themselves—to keep outsiders permanently locked out.



Bear with me as I cite a few statistics. I think you'll be shocked.

To get on the Georgia ballot in a statewide election, a third party or independent candidate must collect, on petitions, signatures from 2.5% of the state's registered voters. That translates into roughly 60,000 names—a staggering number. To make sure they have enough valid signatures, candidates must collect even more—often an extra third or so.

But that's just the beginning. The law also requires that a party circulate **separate petitions** for each candidate it runs. So to run a full slate of ten candidates for statewide office, a third party must collect well over 700,000 signatures on ten different petitions—a number greater than 25 percent of the registered voters in the state!

You might as well ask them to jump over the moon.

If that party also wants to contest other races, they face yet another burden: the percentage requirements for local elections is **twice** that of statewide offices. Signatures of fully 5 percent of

those registered to vote in the election must be gathered—and, again, on separate petitions for each candidate.

No third party can possibly meet such requirements.

To put these figures in perspective, consider this: more signatures must be collected to run a slate of third party candidates in Georgia than in the next ten most difficult states **combined**. And those ten states contain fully **39 percent** of nation's population!

That's just a wee bit excessive, isn't it?

Here's another revealing comparison. In 1984, prominent Democratic Party presidential hopefuls needed only 25,000 signatures to run in **every primary and caucus in America**. Yet even **twice** that many signatures wouldn't get a single statewide third party or independent candidate on the Georgia ballot alone.

Even Nicaragua's ballot laws seem generous in comparison.

I could go on citing horror stories and statistics, but it should be obvious that these restrictions are grotesquely unfair

and undemocratic.

There is no justification for such laws. Many states require only 1,000 signatures, or less, for ballot status. They encounter no problems with over-crowded ballots or frivolous candidates. And their voters benefit greatly from the increased discussion of issues that third party and independent candidates traditionally bring to elections.

The only conceivable reason for Georgia's monstrous ballot restrictions is the obvious one: to crush any potential challenges to the major party monopoly of state politics. These laws are disturbingly reminiscent of the maze of restrictions that for so many decades kept Georgia blacks from exercising their political rights. They are equally contemptible.

The Georgia General Assembly will have a chance this year to rectify this sorry situation. At the urging of several Georgia third parties, a Senate committee headed by Sen. Culver Kidd (D-Milledgeville) has declared support for significant ballot law reform. While the signature re-

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quirements being discussed—in the ten to twenty-thousand range—are still far higher than necessary, it nonetheless would be a great improvement and other onerous restrictions would be major advances.

Sen. Kidd and the others who are supporting these changes are to be commended. Now let's hope that a majority of legislators will be equally fair-minded and vote to change these unjust, indefensible, and undemocratic laws.