

Access denied

A measure before the state House attempted to ease ballot access requirements, but it was tabled and time ran out. Can Oklahoma change its ballot laws, the strictest in the country?

BY C.G. NIEBANK

Third-party presidential candidates could soon find it a little easier to get their names on general election ballots in Oklahoma, their road made a bit smoother by a proposed bill that may come up for a vote in the Oklahoma Legislature in 2010.

Although House Bill 1072 was recently tabled in a conference committee, the move gave the bill's backers more time to persuade legislators to ease Oklahoma's ballot access requirements.

Under the present state law, for a third-party candidate's name to appear on the presidential ballot in Oklahoma, 3 percent of the number of voters in the previous presidential election must sign petitions asking that a third-party candidate's name appear on the ballot.

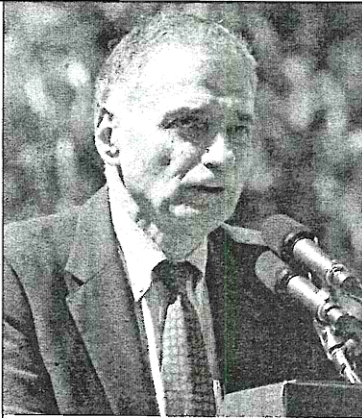
Mark Snyder, a former Edmond state Senator and a lobbyist for Oklahomans for Ballot Access Reform (OBAR), a coalition of alternative parties and other organizations working to change access laws, said the current ballot law requires third-party candidates to gather as many as 77,000 signatures for their party to be included on the 2010 ballot in Oklahoma.

"Members of the Legislature are willing to make it easier by tying the required number of signatures to the governor's election only," Snyder said, which he noted would be about 28,000 signatures. "That's a step in the right direction, but when you look nationally, there's no reason not to move it on down to somewhere in the 10,000-signature range, because you're just keeping people out of being part of the process with an unreasonable number."

In a statement released after HB 1072 was tabled on May 18, OBAR chair Joni LeViness said she was encouraged that the bill was kept alive, allowing for further discussion.

"The strong support for House Bill 1072 showed us that legislators now recognize their constituents' concerns about voter choice. However, the tabling of our bill tells us we have more educating to do."

According to the OBAR statement, the group has been asking the



Ralph Nader was a third-party presidential candidate in every state in 2008 except Oklahoma, where write-ins are not allowed. "Oklahoma is now a corporate colony run by oil-marinated politicians," Nader reportedly said during the election.

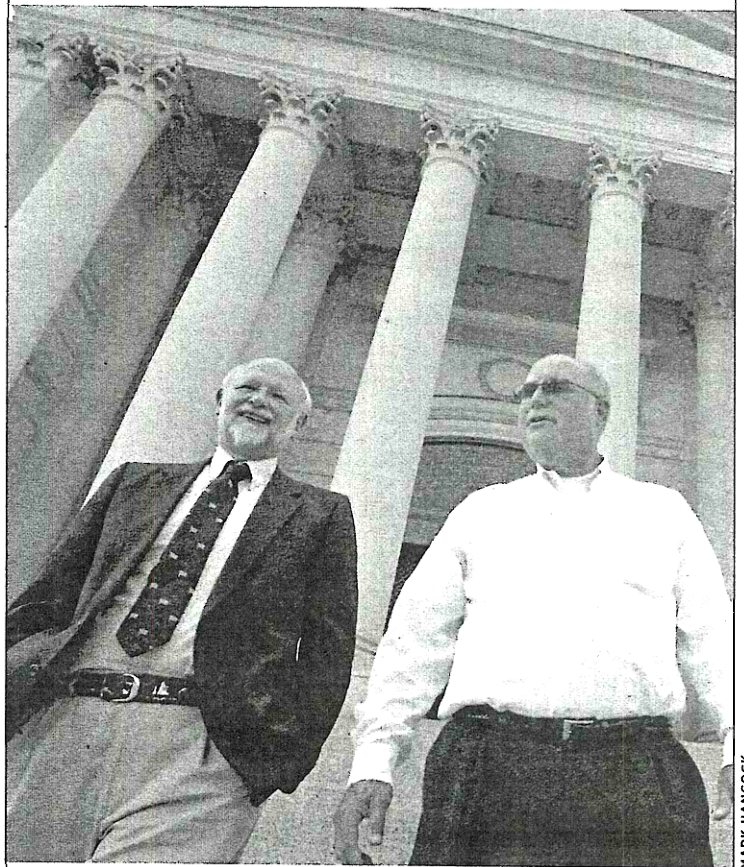
Legislature to return the state's signature threshold to 5,000, which was the requirement from 1924 to 1974.

Richard Winger, editor of Ballot Access News and a longtime ballot access reform advocate based in San Francisco, said he is puzzled by the tough ballot access requirements placed on third-party presidential candidates in Oklahoma.

"Here's what's really, really strange about Oklahoma's election law: For independent candidates for any office except president, it's the easiest in the country," Winger said. "You can get on the November ballot in Oklahoma for any office except president just by paying a fairly modest filing fee. You need zero signatures. And it doesn't cause a crowded ballot, which is the funny thing, because it's been like that since 1910. Ninety-nine years of perfect ballot freedom in Oklahoma for any office except president."

Angelia O'Dell, vice chair of OBAR and state chair for the Libertarian Party, said she is tired of having to choose between the Republican and Democratic candidates if she wants to vote for president.

"Being with a third party, you don't really have a voice in the state



Richard Prawdzienski left, Libertarian Party of Oklahoma member, talks with Mark Snyder, lobbyist for Oklahomans for Ballot Access Reform (OBAR).

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of Oklahoma, and we wanted to have a voice, and we wanted to be able to vote for our candidate of our designated parties," O'Dell said. "To me, it's like being stabbed in the heart, because I don't have a voice. I just want people (to) know that my party

is here and that we want a chance."

Lynn Howell, state chair of Common Cause Oklahoma, said greater ballot access for third parties could comprise an additional check and balance.

"We have watchdogs, but to keep our government honest and the people in it operating ethically, you need to have them all watching each other," Howell said. "We started out as a populist state, and the Socialists were the second-biggest party in Oklahoma for a while, and we had a lot of diversity."

"What does it hurt to have a lot of names on the ballot? There may be a position on an issue that a lot of people care about, and if that party gets a lot of votes, that will get the attention of the major parties."

Snyder said he understands the reluctance of legislators to change the present law.

"These guys are saying, 'It's working for me, why would I want to change it?' People really don't like change — they're afraid of what the end result might be," he said.

"Legislation doesn't happen very fast, and ideas don't change very rapidly, particularly when something seems to be working as it is. I've seen good ideas take four or five, or as many as eight years, to get passed and implemented." **OKG**

MARK HANCOCK