

BILL ANALYSIS

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S.B. 488
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AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Home-rule municipalities in Texas have fairly broad discretion to place initiatives before voters for consideration; however, there is little uniformity in the processes used due to local elections being governed by each municipality's charter. The Texas Supreme Court has recently been tasked, as the result of citizen-led mandamus and recall petitions, with reviewing the actions of local governments and the ballot language used when initiatives were put forth. The court ultimately found that voters were being misled by the ballot language and required that referendums be resubmitted to voters, resulting in additional costs to taxpayers. In order to guarantee citizens uniform and fair elections, S.B. 488 outlines the process that must be followed by home-rule municipalities to propose charter amendments and citizen-driven petition referendums, and establishes safeguards to ensure that ballot language accurately describes the proposition being placed before voters. Specifically, the bill standardizes forms and removes overly broad restrictions when submitting petitions, removes ambiguous statutory language and establishes a uniform process for citizen-driven referendums, and allows an objective review of ballot language before being put to voters.

As proposed, S.B. 488 amends current law relating to requirements for certain petitions requesting an election and ballot propositions.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Section 52.072, Election Code, by adding Subsection (f), to require that a proposition substantially submit the question with such definiteness and certainty that the voters are not misled.

SECTION 2. Amends Section 253.094(b), Election Code, to prohibit a corporation or labor organization, other than a religious organization, from making a political contribution in connection with a recall election, including the circulation and submission of a petition to call an election.

SECTION 3. Amends Chapter 273, Election Code, by adding Subchapter F, as follows:

SUBCHAPTER F. BALLOT PROPOSITION LANGUAGE ENFORCEMENT PROVISIONS

Sec. 273.101. REVIEW BY SECRETARY OF STATE. (a) Authorizes a registered voter eligible to vote in the election, not later than a certain date, to submit the proposition for review by the secretary of state (SOS).

(b) Requires SOS to review the proposition not later than the seventh day after the date SOS receives the submission to determine whether the proposition is misleading or inaccurate.

(c) Requires the city, if SOS determines that the proposition is misleading or inaccurate, to draft a proposition to cure the defects and give notice of the new proposition using the prescribed method under Section 4.003 (Method of Giving Notice).

Sec. 273.102. MANDAMUS ACTIONS. (a) Requires a district court, in an action in the court seeking a writ of mandamus to compel the city's governing body to comply with the requirement that a ballot proposition is to substantially submit the question with such definiteness and certainty that the voters are not misled, to make its determination without delay. Authorizes the court to order the city to use ballot proposition language drafted by the court.

(b) Authorizes the court to award a plaintiff who substantially prevails in a mandamus action the party's reasonable attorney's fees, expenses, and court costs.

Sec. 273.103. MANDATORY SUBMISSION TO SECRETARY OF STATE. Requires a city, following a final nonappealable judgment containing a finding by a court that a ballot proposition drafted by the city failed to substantially submit the question with such definiteness and certainty that the voters are not misled, to submit to SOS for approval any proposition to be voted on at an election held by the city before the fourth anniversary of the court's finding.

Sec. 273.104. CITY REQUIRED TO PAY FOR LEGAL SERVICES. Prohibits a city, notwithstanding a home-rule city charter provision to the contrary, from accepting legal services relating to a proceeding without paying fair market value for those services.

SECTION 4. Redesignates Sections 277.001, 277.002, 277.0021, 277.0022, 277.0023, 277.0024, and 277.003, Election Code, as Subchapter A, Chapter 277, Election Code, and adds a heading for Subchapter A to read as follows:

**SUBCHAPTER A. PROVISIONS RELATING TO SIGNATURES, VALIDITY, AND
VERIFICATION OF PETITIONS**

SECTION 5. Amends Section 277.001, Election Code, as follows:

Sec. 277.001. New heading: APPLICABILITY OF SUBCHAPTER. Provides that this subchapter, rather than chapter, applies to a petition authorized or required to be filed under a law outside this code in connection with an election.

SECTION 6. Amends Section 277.002, Election Code, by adding Subsection (f), to provide that a signature on a petition submitted to a home-rule city is valid if the information provided with the signature as required by this section and other applicable law legibly provides enough information to demonstrate that the signer is eligible to have signed the petition and signed the petition on or after the 180th day before the date the petition was filed.

SECTION 7. Amends Subchapter A, Chapter 277, Election Code, by adding Section 277.005, as follows:

Sec. 277.005. PETITION FORM; USE BY CITY. (a) Requires SOS to prescribe a form, content, and procedure for a petition.

(b) Prohibits a home-rule city that uses a form different from the official form prescribed by SOS from invalidating a petition because the petition does not contain information that the petition form failed to provide for or to require to be provided.

SECTION 8. Amends Chapter 277, Election Code, by adding Subchapter B, as follows:

SUBCHAPTER B. SUBMISSION OF CERTAIN CITY PETITIONS

Sec. 277.031. APPLICABILITY OF SUBCHAPTER. Provides that this subchapter applies to a home-rule city that has a procedure requiring the governing body of the city to hold an election on receipt of a petition requesting the election that complies with the applicable requirements.

Sec. 277.032. CONFLICTS WITH CITY CHARTER OR OTHER LAW. Provides that the provisions of this subchapter apply notwithstanding any city charter provision or other law.

Sec. 277.033. DETERMINATION OF VALIDITY; REQUIRED ACTION. (a) Requires the city secretary to determine the validity of a submitted petition, including by verifying the petition signatures, not later than the 30th day after the date the city receives the petition.

(b) Requires the city, if the city secretary determines that a submitted petition meets the applicable requirements or fails to make a determination within the prescribed time, to hold the election on the next uniform election date that allows sufficient time to comply with applicable provisions of law, including Section 3.005 (Time for Ordering Election).

Sec. 277.034. COLLECTOR REQUIREMENTS PROHIBITED. Prohibits a city from restricting who may collect petition signatures.

SECTION 9. Amends Sections 9.004(a) and (c), Local Government Code, as follows:

(a) Requires the governing body to submit a proposed charter amendment to the voters for their approval at an election if the submission is supported by a petition signed by a number of registered, rather than qualified, voters of the municipality equal to at least five percent of the number of registered voters of the municipality on the date of the most recent election held throughout the municipality or 20,000, whichever number is the smaller. Makes a conforming change.

(c) Redefines the content and publication requirements for the notice of the election required to be published in a newspaper of general circulation in the municipality.

SECTION 10. Repealer: Section 277.004 (Effect of City Charter or Ordinance), Election Code.

SECTION 11. Requires SOS, not later than January 1, 2018, to adopt a petition form as required by Section 277.005, Election Code.

SECTION 12. Makes application of this Act prospective to January 1, 2018.

SECTION 13. Effective date: September 1, 2017.