

Press Release

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Rich Templin, Florida AFL-CIO – (850) 566-4348

Dianne Wheatley Giliotti, League of Women Voters – (727) 734-2968

Ben Wilcox, Common Cause – (850) 544-4448

Laura Goodhue, Florida ACORN – (561) 512-7579

Brad Ashwell, Florida PIRG – (850) 294-1008

Grass Roots Coalition Launches Campaign to Encourage “The People’s Governor” to Protect Floridians’ Right to Amend their Constitution with a Veto of Legislation Designed to Stifle Ballot Initiatives

A letter signed by 25 organizations representing approximately 2 million voters urging a veto of SB 900 was sent to the Governor’s office today, kicking off what the groups promise to be a major grassroots campaign.

A broad coalition of environmental groups, consumer advocates, government watchdogs, community advocates and labor unions announced today a public campaign to encourage Governor Charlie Crist to veto legislation that would greatly weaken, if not eliminate the citizen’s ballot initiative. The diverse group which includes the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, the Florida Public Interest Research Group, Sierra Club, Florida Consumer Action Network, ACORN, the Florida AFL-CIO and many others sent a letter to Governor Charlie Crist urging his veto of SB 900. This bill, passed in the final hours of the legislative session, would make it virtually impossible for citizen groups to collect petitions to place proposed constitutional amendments on the ballot - effectively eliminating the right of Floridians to amend their Constitution.

The groups have also promised to mobilize their individual memberships, collectively in the millions, to encourage the Governor to veto this anti-democratic legislation.

Florida’s Constitution is already the most difficult to amend among the states with a ballot initiative, thanks to the 60% supermajority required for amendment passage, the mandatory supreme court review of ballot language, one of the highest numbers of signatures required for ballot placement and a requirement that signatures be gathered from all of Florida’s congressional districts. SB 900 would make that process even more difficult, if not impossible, by placing new restrictions on the signature gathering process itself.

The legislation would place a strict new 30-day deadline for volunteers to turn in signed petition forms. Numerous volunteer organizations like the League of Women Voters and the American Cancer Society testified during legislative committee meetings that this short time frame would make any future petition gathering efforts exceedingly difficult and would

probably force them out of the process altogether. Furthermore, any signed petition that is turned in after 30 days from the date signed would be invalid, and there is no requirement that local elections officials notify voters that their petitions were thrown out. Since voters can only legally sign a petition once, thousands of voters could be disenfranchised from the process through no fault of their own.

SB 900 also creates a new signature revocation process. Through this process, well funded special interest groups would have 120 days after a signature is verified and entered into the system to follow up with the voter and encourage them to revoke their signature. Lists of the voters who signed a petition and their contact information is public record, so a new industry of paid firms can then gather this information and harass voters in their homes to gain widespread revocations in an effort to derail ballot campaigns.

Eliminating the citizen's ballot initiative has long been a priority for the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Florida Retail Federation and other big business groups since the passage of the Class Size Amendment and the State Minimum Wage, two amendments they vigorously opposed but were unable to stop at the ballot box. This bill represents the final piece of a multi-stage strategy to end the initiative process without ever directly asking the voters whether or not they want to give up their right to amend the Constitution.

Governor Crist has publicly stated that he supports the ballot initiative process and that he would be opposed to any attempts to weaken it. The groups participating in this public campaign are hoping that a strong show of public opposition to the bill will encourage the Governor to follow through on that pledge and veto SB 900.

A Copy of the letter to Governor Crist is attached

###