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## SHOULD LOUISIANIANS TAKE THE INITIATIVE?

by

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Governor Foster wants Louisiana citizens to have "the power to change our state." This power would be granted by creating an initiative process allowing voters to place issues directly on the ballot by petition. Nearly half the states now have some form of initiative. However, their experience raises serious questions about this type of direct democracy.

At its best, the initiative can bypass a stubborn legislature to achieve reforms, stimulate public interest, undermine the power of special interests and pressure a legislature to act responsibly. At its worst, the initiative subverts the legislative process; results in outlandish, badly drafted or ill-conceived proposals; encourages expensive and deceptive campaigns; confuses the voters and discourages political compromise. The initiative can be abused by well-financed special interests.

Louisianians should not be too quick to give up on representative democracy. Even given the recent gambling debacle, the Legislature has allowed voters to decide many issues that have frequently been the subject of initiatives in other states. Legislative term limits, requiring super-majority votes on tax and fee increases and the balanced budget requirements are some recent examples.

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If an initiative process is proposed, PAR suggests that it be drafted carefully to avoid problems experienced elsewhere. An initiative process should give the Legislature an opportunity to vote on the issue before it goes on the ballot. After a petition is circulated, the proponents of an initiative issue and the Legislature should each be allowed to correct drafting errors in the proposal without changing its meaning. And, the state should give voters ample information explaining the proposal and identifying the major contributors on either side of an initiative campaign.

The checks and balances built into our legislative process ensure that a proposal is considered and debated a number of times. While these hurdles are sometimes used to stop good bills, they often prove deadly for bad legislation. Properly limited, the initiative could give voters a workable tool to use as a last resort when the Legislature refuses to act on an issue of great public concern.