

October 23, 2017

Monica Jackson  
Office of the Executive Secretary  
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau  
1700 G Street, NW  
Washington DC 20552

***Re: Final Rule on Arbitration Agreements***

The 370 undersigned consumer, civil rights, labor, community, and non-profit organizations write to state our strong support for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB)'s final rule to limit pre-dispute binding mandatory (or forced) arbitration clauses in consumer finance contracts. The rule, which will restore consumers' ability to band together in court to pursue claims, is a significant step forward in the ongoing fight to curb predatory practices in consumer financial products and services and to make these markets fairer and safer.

Lenders and other financial services companies use forced arbitration to push consumers out of court and into a private arbitration system that is tilted against them. Forced arbitration eliminates the right to a civil jury trial, limits discovery, restricts or prohibits public disclosure of proceedings and outcomes, and makes meaningful appeals virtually impossible. It also often prohibits consumers from banding together in a class action to hold the company responsible.

Recent scandals again demonstrate the very real harm forced arbitration causes consumers. Reports show that customers had been trying to sue financial services institutions over fraudulent accounts going back a number of years.<sup>1</sup> However, some banks forced those customers into secret, binding arbitration by invoking fine print in consumers' legitimate account agreements to block them from suing over reasons as outrageous as fake accounts, also helping to keep the scandal out of the public eye. Even in cases where widespread fraud has been exposed, banks continue to invoke these fine-print clauses to kill lawsuits stemming from their illegal acts and block consumer recovery.<sup>2</sup>

The CFPB's thorough arbitration study<sup>3</sup> further documents how forced arbitration blocks consumer access to courts, shielding banks and lenders from meaningful accountability for their unlawful behavior. Finalizing the proposed rule will restore crucial class action rights that deter systemic abuses and bring much-needed transparency to consumer financial arbitration.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hiltzik, *How Wells Fargo exploited a binding arbitration clause to deflect customers' fraud allegations*, THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, Sept. 26, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-hiltzik-wells-arbitration-20160926-snap-story.html>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Corkery & Stacy Cowley, *Wells Fargo Killing Sham Account Suits by Using Arbitration*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Dec. 6, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/business/dealbook/wells-fargo-killing-sham-account-suits-by-using-arbitration.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Arbitration Study: Report to Congress, pursuant to Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act § 1028(a)."

## **The CFPB Study Data Shows That Forced Arbitration Eliminates Consumer Claims and Shields Companies from Accountability**

The CFPB's study verified the prevalence of forced arbitration clauses – including class action bans – in consumer financial contracts and found that this practice impacts tens of millions of consumers. Yet it also revealed that consumers typically have no idea they are signing away their right to sue in court when they participate in the financial marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

The most obvious impact of forced arbitration clauses is that they block most consumer claims from going forward at all. Class action bans prevent consumers from bringing complaints of fraud or other abusive or deceptive practices in financial services because the individual value of these claims is often too small for a single consumer to afford to bring alone. Without the option to join together in a class action, just 25 consumers with claims of under \$1,000 pursued arbitration each year. In a country of over 320 million, these numbers leave no doubt that class action bans effectively wipe out consumer claims and thus shield corporate wrongdoers from liability. In the few claims that went to arbitration, the study also confirmed that forced arbitration overwhelmingly favors industry over consumers.<sup>5</sup>

## **Class Actions Provide Great Benefit for Consumers Cheated by Systemic Wrongdoing and Deter Risky or Illegal Conduct**

The data makes clear that class actions provide a practical way for groups of consumers who have suffered the same kind of abuse from the same corporate wrongdoer to join together to attempt to hold the financial institution accountable. The CFPB study found that 34 million consumers received a total of \$2.2 billion in cash payments, debt forbearance, and other in-kind relief from 2008-2012 – not including any attorneys' fees or court costs.

These findings were echoed in an empirical study by disinterested academics, which found consumer class actions against illegal overdraft fees “deliver[ed] fair compensation to a significant portion of class members.” Several major banks settled class actions that claimed the banks had purposely reordered consumer transactions to maximize the amount of overdraft fees charged to the consumer. This study found that plaintiffs in these cases recovered up to “65% of damages, with the variation based largely on the strength of the class's claims and the likelihood of winning certification of the class.”<sup>6</sup> Yet unknown thousands of other consumers subject to similarly unlawful overdraft fee practices likely got little or no relief when class actions against their banks were dismissed due to arbitration clauses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Data revealed that more than 75 percent of consumers surveyed did not know whether they were subject to forced arbitration in their consumer financial contracts, and fewer than 7 percent of those covered by arbitration clauses realized the clauses restricted their ability to sue in court.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010 and 2011, only 9% of consumers who brought affirmative claims obtained relief in forced arbitration, recovering an average of 12 cents per dollar claimed. In contrast, 93% of companies obtained relief in forced arbitration, recovering an average of 98 cents per dollar.

<sup>6</sup> Brian T. Fitzpatrick and Robert C. Gilbert, *An Empirical Look at Compensation in Consumer Class Actions* 11 NEW YORK JOURNAL OF LAW & BUSINESS 4 (2015). Available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2577775>.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., *In re Checking Account Overdraft Litigation*, 2012 WL 660974 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. Mar. 1, 2012) (finding arbitration contract was not unconscionable).

Even assuming that their claims would be fairly resolved in arbitration, leaving 34 million consumers to find their own attorney, establish the individual facts of their case, and take time off work to attend an arbitration will never be more efficient than pooling time and resources between millions of consumers harmed in the same way by the same bank or lender to challenge abusive practices. Indeed, additional empirical scholarship demonstrates that most consumers are unaware when they have been harmed, unaware that the harm violates a law, or have decided that filing individual claims is not worth their time and expense.<sup>8</sup>

Collective action is critically important, not only for enabling those already victimized to obtain justice, but also for deterring bad behavior and preventing harm to other victims. While each individual consumer may only lose \$25 or \$50 to a fraudulent charge or illegal fee, for example, unlawful practices implemented at a systemic level can add up to millions or more in ill-gotten gains for banks and lenders who violate the law. Government enforcers have limited resources, and the prospect of class actions helps ensure that banks and lenders obey legal requirements that protect consumers.

### **The Rule's Reporting Requirements Add Crucial Transparency to Arbitration**

Our organizations strongly support the proposed provision to begin shining a light on individual arbitrations through reporting requirements. Unlike our legal system, which is built upon hundreds of years of precedent, common law principles, and statutory standards of fairness and ethics, arbitration firms have few constraints on their practices and scant record of their proceedings. The substantially shorter history of consumer arbitration has nonetheless produced both anecdotal claims of unethical behavior<sup>9</sup> and documented systemic abuses by unregulated arbitration firms.<sup>10</sup>

The rule's reporting requirements will lend crucial transparency and accountability to a previously opaque system. Increased transparency can help consumers make informed decisions when choosing how to pursue their claim, in line with well-established principles of the free market. Data collected by the CFPB will also help other government entities, as well as the general public, ensure that arbitrators operate within the law and treat all parties fairly.

### **The Rule is in the Public Interest and for the Protection of Consumers**

Because forced arbitration undermines compliance with laws and creates an uneven playing field between corporations that use forced arbitration and those that allow for greater consumer choice in dispute resolution, it is in the public interest and in the interest of consumer protection to prohibit or strictly curtail the use of forced arbitration clauses in consumer financial contracts.

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<sup>8</sup> When consumers *are* aware of being wronged they may raise complaints internally with companies, file with a government agency, or seek protection from a credit card company if appropriate, rather than engage in more difficult and expensive litigation or arbitration. See Jean R. Sternlight, *Mandatory Binding Arbitration Clauses Prevent Consumers from Presenting Procedurally Difficult Claims*, 42 SOUTHWESTERN L. REV. 87, 101-102 (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Jessica Silver-Greenberg & Michael Corkery, *In Arbitration, a 'Privatization of the Justice System,'* THE NEW YORK TIMES, Nov. 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/02/business/dealbook/in-arbitration-a-privatization-of-the-justice-system.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Complaint for Injunctive Relief & Civil Penalties for Violations of Business & Professions Code Section 17200, *People v. Nat'l Arbitration Forum, Inc.*, No. CGC-08- 473569 (Cal. Super. Ct. Mar. 24, 2008).

We commend the CFPB for finalizing its rule to restore consumers' right to choose how to resolve disputes with financial institutions and address the public harm caused by forced arbitration, as thoroughly documented in its three-year, comprehensive study.

For questions about this letter, please contact Amanda Werner, Arbitration Campaign Manager with Americans for Financial Reform and Public Citizen, (202) 973-8004, [awerner@ourfinancialsecurity.org](mailto:awerner@ourfinancialsecurity.org); and Christine Hines, National Association of Consumer Advocates, (202) 452-1989, [christine@consumeradvocates.org](mailto:christine@consumeradvocates.org).

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views.

### **National Signatories**

9to5, National Association of Working Women  
Action In Maturity, Inc.  
Affordable Housing Alliance  
AFL-CIO  
Alianza Americas  
Alliance for Justice  
Allied Progress  
American Association for Justice  
American Association of University Women (AAUW)  
American Council of the Blind  
American Family Voices  
American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)  
American Federation of Teachers  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Americans for Financial Reform  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Bankruptcy Law Center  
The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Bend the Arc Jewish Action  
Center for Economic Integrity  
Center for Economic Justice  
Center for Global Policy Solutions  
Center for Justice & Democracy  
Center for Popular Democracy  
Center for Progressive Reform  
Center for Responsible Lending  
Centro Legal de la Raza  
CFED  
Coalition on Human Needs  
Committee to Support the Antitrust Laws

Communications Workers of America  
Congregation of Saint Joseph – Peace and Justice Team  
Consumer Action  
Consumer Federation of America  
Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety  
Consumers Union  
Consumer Voice  
Daily Kos  
Demos  
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund  
Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN)  
Economic Policy Institute  
The Employee Rights Advocacy Institute For Law & Policy  
Equal Justice Society  
Equal Justice Works  
Fair Share  
The Financial Clinic  
Food & Water Watch  
Fund Democracy  
Global Justice Institute  
Government Accountability Project  
Green Peace Corps  
Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights  
Higher Ed, Not Debt  
Hindu American Foundation  
Homeowners Against Deficient Dwellings  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy  
The Institute for College Access & Success  
Institute for Science and Human Values  
Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility  
International Association for College Admission Counseling  
Jobs With Justice  
Justice in Aging  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
League of United Latin American Citizens  
Let Freedom Ring  
Main Street Alliance  
Manufactured Housing Action  
Mission Asset Fund  
NAACP  
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.  
National Association for College Admission Counseling  
National Association of Consumer Advocates  
National Association of Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys (NACBA)  
National Association for Latino Community Asset Builders

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)  
National Center for Law and Economic Justice  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Center for Transgender Equality  
National Coalition For Asian Pacific American Community Development  
National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC)  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of La Raza/UnidosUS  
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low income clients)  
National Consumers League  
National Employment Lawyers Association  
National Employment Law Project  
National Fair Housing Alliance  
National Health Law Program  
National Latino Farmers & Ranchers Trade Association  
National Legal Aid and Defender Association  
National LGBTQ Task Force  
National Partnership for Women & Families  
National Organization for Women  
National Urban League  
National Women's Law Center  
New Rules for Global Finance  
Occupational Safety & Health Law Project  
Other98  
People's Action  
Priests of the Sacred Heart, U.S. Province  
Privacy Rights Clearinghouse  
Progressive Congress Action Fund  
Protect All Children's Environment  
Public Advocacy for Kids  
Public Citizen  
Public Justice  
Public Knowledge  
Public Law Center  
The Rootstrikers Project at Demand Progress  
Salvadoran American National Network (SANN)  
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)  
Sierra Club  
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Congregational Leadership  
Small Business Majority  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
State Innovation Exchange (SIX)  
Together We Will  
TURN–The Utility Reform Network  
UltraViolet  
United Auto Workers (UAW)

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries  
United Policyholders  
U.S. PIRG  
Veterans Education Success  
Woodstock Institute  
Workplace Fairness  
Worksafe  
World Hunger Education, Advocacy & Training (WHEAT)  
Young Invincibles

### **State and Local Signatories**

#### **Alabama**

Woodmere Neighborhood Association – AL

#### **Arkansas**

Arkansans Against Abusive Payday Lending – AR  
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families – AR  
Northcentral Arkansas Development Council – AR

#### **Arizona**

Arizona Community Action Association – AZ  
Arizona PIRG – AZ  
Gila County Community Services – AZ  
Mesa Community Action Network – AZ  
Save the Family Foundation of Arizona – AZ

#### **California**

Asian Law Alliance – CA  
California Reinvestment Coalition – CA  
California Resources and Training – CA  
CALPIRG – CA  
Center for Public Interest Law, University of San Diego School of Law – CA  
CLUE: Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice – CA  
Community Development Technologies (CDTech) – CA  
Consumer Attorneys of California – CA  
Consumer Federation of California – CA  
East Bay Community Law Center – CA  
East LA Community Corporation – CA  
Golden State Manufactured-home Owners League – CA  
The Greenlining Institute – CA  
Law Foundation of Silicon Valley – CA  
Public Counsel – CA  
Resistance Action Tuesdays and Thursdays (RATT Pack) – CA  
Wrigley Is Going Green! – CA

## **Colorado**

9to5 Colorado – CO  
Bell Policy Center – CO  
Build Our Homes Right – CO  
Colorado AFL-CIO – CO  
Colorado Alliance of Retired Americans – CO  
Colorado Center on Law & Policy – CO  
Colorado Council of Churches – CO  
Colorado Fiscal Institute – CO  
Colorado Latino Forum, Denver Chapter – CO  
Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy and Research Organization (CLLARO) – CO  
Colorado Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) – CO  
Colorado Trial Lawyers Association – CO  
NAACP State Conference – CO, MT, WY  
National Council of Jewish Women, Colorado Section – CO  
The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado – CO

## **Connecticut**

Capital For Change, Inc. – CT  
CT. Citizen Action Group – CT  
Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. – CT  
ConnPIRG – CT

## **Delaware**

Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia – DC  
ACLU of Delaware, Inc. – DE  
Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. – DE  
Delaware Alliance for Community Advancement – DE  
Delaware Community Reinvestment Action Council, Inc. – DE  
Delaware Manufactured Homeowners Association (DMHOA) – DE

## **Florida**

Catalyst Miami – FL  
Fair Housing Center of the Greater Palm Beaches – FL  
Florida Alliance for Consumer Protection – FL  
Florida PIRG – FL  
Jacksonville Area Legal Aid, Inc. – FL  
Needy Basket Miami County Food Pantry – FL  
Progress Florida – FL

## **Georgia**

Georgia PIRG – GA  
Georgia Rural Urban Summit – GA  
Georgia Watch – GA  
Progressive Christian Ministries, Inc. – GA

## **Iowa**

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement – IA  
Iowa PIRG – IA

## **Illinois**

Chicago Jobs Council – IL  
Citizen Action – IL  
Illinois Asset Building Group – IL  
Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling – IL  
Illinois PIRG – IL  
Manufactured Home Owners Association of Illinois – IL  
Metropolitan Tenants Organization – IL  
Partners In Community Building, Inc. – IL  
Project IRENE – IL

## **Indiana**

Habitat for Humanity of Northeast Indiana – IN  
HomesteadCS – IN  
Indiana University McKinney School of Law – IN

## **Kansas**

Interfaith Housing Services, Inc. – KS  
Labette Assistance Center – KS

## **Kentucky**

Homeless & Housing Coalition of Kentucky – KY  
Kentucky Council of Churches – KY  
Kentucky Equal Justice Center – KY

## **Louisiana**

Louisiana Budget Project – LA  
The Middleburg Institute/LABEST – LA  
PREACH – LA

## **Maine**

Maine Center for Economic Policy – ME

## **Massachusetts**

Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee, Inc. – MA  
Community Action! – MA  
Consumer Assistance Council, Inc. – MA  
Consumer World – MA  
Greater Lawrence Community Action – Consumer Protection Program – MA  
Massachusetts Consumers Council, Inc. – MA  
MASSPIRG – MA  
The Midas Collaborative – MA

### **Maryland**

Baltimore CASH Campaign – MD  
Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc. – MD  
Belair-Edison Neighborhoods, Inc. – MD  
Civil Justice, Inc. – MD  
Housing Options & Planning Enterprises, Inc. – MD  
Howard County Office of Consumer Protection – MD  
Maryland CASH Campaign – MD  
Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition – MD  
Maryland PIRG – MD  
Maryland United for Peace and Justice – MD  
Public Justice Center – MD

### **Michigan**

Michigan Association for College Admission Counseling – MI  
Michigan Disability Rights Coalition – MI  
PIRG in Michigan (PIRGIM) – MI  
Progress Michigan – MI

### **Minnesota**

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid – MN  
Minnesota Association for College Admission Counseling – MN

### **Missouri**

L and C Ministries – MO  
Missouri Association for College Admission Counseling – MO  
Missouri Faith Voices – MO  
Missouri PIRG – MO  
MORE - Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment – MO  
RAA Ready, Aim, Advocate – MO

### **Mississippi**

Mississippi Center for Justice – MS

### **Montana**

AFSCME Montana Council 9 – MT  
Greater Yellowstone Central Labor Council – MT  
Laborers Local #1686 – MT  
Montana Organizing Project – MT  
Rural Dynamics, Inc. – MT

### **Nebraska**

Nebraska Appleseed – NE

### **New Hampshire**

Granite State Organizing Project – NH

Green Alliance – NH

NHPIRG – NH

### **New Jersey**

Action Together Atlantic and Cape May Counties – NJ

Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey – NJ

Consumers League of New Jersey – NJ

Legal Services of New Jersey – NJ

Manufactured Home Owners of New Jersey, Inc. – NJ

New Jersey Association for College Admission Counseling – NJ

New Jersey Citizen Action – NJ

NJ PIRG – NJ

Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell – NJ

### **New Mexico**

Center for Economic Integrity - New Mexico Office – NM

NMPIRG – NM

### **Nevada**

Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, Inc. – NV

Opportunity Alliance Nevada – NV

### **New York**

Bankruptcy Law Center – NY

Central New York Citizens in Action, Inc. – NY

Community Service Society of New York – NY

DC 37 AFSCME Municipal Employees Legal Services – NY

Empire Justice Center – NY

Empire State Consumer Project – NY

Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition – NY

Helping Hands for the Disabled of NYC – NY

Housing and Family Services of Greater New York, Inc. – NY

Hudson River Housing – NY

JASA Legal Services for the Elderly in Queens – NY

Keuka Housing Council, Inc. – NY

Long Island Housing Services, Inc. – NY

Make the Road New York – NY

MFY Legal Services, Inc. – NY

NELA/NY (New York Affiliate of National Employment Lawyers Association) – NY

New Economy Project – NY

New York Legal Assistance Group – NY

New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) – NY

New York State Association for College Admission Counseling – NY

Public Utility Law Project of New York – NY

Western New York Law Center – NY

**North Carolina**

Financial Pathways of the Piedmont – NC

North Carolina Consumers Council – NC

North Carolina Justice Center – NC

NCPIRG – NC

OnTrack WNC Financial Education & Counseling – NC

Reinvestment Partners – NC

The Collaborative NC – NC

Winston Salem Forsyth County Asset Building Coalition – NC

**North Dakota**

North Dakota Economic Security and Prosperity Alliance – ND

Sacred Pipe Resource Center – ND

**Ohio**

Cleveland Tenants Organization – OH

COHHIO – OH

Habitat for Humanity of Findlay/Hancock County – OH

Miami Valley Fair Housing Center, Inc. – OH

Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland – OH

Ohio Association of Local Reentry Coalitions – OH

Ohio PIRG – OH

Ohio Poverty Law Center – OH

**Oregon**

Innovative Changes – OR

Oregon Consumer League – OR

Oregon PIRG (OSPIRG) – OR

**Pennsylvania**

Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh – PA

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank – PA

Integra Home Counseling, Inc. – PA

Keystone Progress – PA

One Less Foundation – PA

PathWays PA – PA

Pennsylvania Association for College Admission Counseling – PA

Pennsylvania Council of Churches – PA

Pennsylvania National Organization for Women – PA

Pennsylvania War Veterans Council – PA

PennPIRG – PA

Urban Affairs Coalition – PA

**Rhode Island**

RIPIRG – RI

**South Carolina**

Columbia Consumer Education Council – SC  
SC Association for Community Economic Development – SC  
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center – SC

**Tennessee**

Bush Financial Services – TN  
New Level Community Development Corporation – TN  
Tennessee Citizen Action – TN

**Texas**

Chinese Community Center, Houston – TX  
Equal Justice Center – TX  
Family Houston – TX  
La Fe Policy Research and Education Center – TX  
Literacy Advance of Houston – TX  
National Council of Jewish Women Texas – TX  
Take Back Your Rights PAC – TX  
Texas Appleseed – TX  
Texas Consumer Association – TX  
Texas Watch – TX  
TexPIRG – TX  
United Way of Greater Houston – TX

**Virginia**

Appalachian Independence Center – VA  
Virginia Citizens Consumer Council – VA  
Virginia Poverty Law Center – VA  
Virginia Organizing – VA

**Vermont**

Vermont PIRG (VPIRG) – VT

**Utah**

Healthy Living Network LLC – UT

**Washington**

Columbia Legal Services – WA  
The Northwest Consumer Law Center – WA  
SafeWork Washington – WA  
WashPIRG – WA

**Washington DC**

Franciscan Action Network – DC

Unity Health Care, Inc. – DC

**Wisconsin**

Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes – WI

End Domestic Abuse – WI

Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee – WI

Madison-area Urban Ministry – WI

WISPIRG – WI

**West Virginia**

Mountain State Justice – WV

WV Center on Budget and Policy – WV

West Virginia Citizen Action Group – WV

**Regional**

Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Western Province Leadership

Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling

Southern Association for College Admission Counseling

Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment

Western Association for College Admission Counseling