



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF OHIO

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Opposition Testimony to HJR 19

House Committee on Government Accountability and Oversight

League of Women Voters of Ohio

Jen Miller, Executive Director

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and esteemed members of the committee:

Thank you for allowing me to speak today in opposition to HJR 19.

I am the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio, and we agree with Ohio's Leadership regarding the sanctity and appropriate scope of the Ohio Constitution – a principle we have held true for our 98-year history. For that reason, we are firmly opposed to rushing this important conversation during lame duck. We assert that the drastic changes proposed in HJR19 would only result in stifling direct democracy by grassroots groups like the League and would create an unfair advantage for groups with large campaign coffers.

The initiative and referendum section of the Ohio Constitution provides Ohio citizens an important opportunity to engage in direct democracy. For a century, Ohio citizens have been using the ballot box to bring issues to voters that Ohio's elected leaders have not addressed. We focus this testimony on three points: (1) additional limits on constitutional initiatives are not needed and actually increase concerns about money in politics; (2) the best way to protect the Constitution, while also preserving Ohio's long legacy of direct democracy, is to lessen the requirements for initiated statutes; and finally (3) there is a growing and diverse coalition in opposition to HJR 19.

With record turnout in the November 2018 election, the requirement has now been raised from 305,591 to 431,840 signatures. The people of Ohio have effectively increased the threshold for signatures by 41 percent. Limiting signature collection to 180 days, between October and April, will drastically reduce the ability of grassroots organizations like the League who rely on volunteer canvassers. Many of our volunteers are teachers, students, or university faculty who have more free time in the summer or are retired Ohioans who have concerns about being outside during adverse weather. Similarly, the warmer months provide ample opportunities to reach the public at-large through

community events such as festivals, county fairs, and parades. This change would result in more paid signature collections, not less, providing an unfair advantage to big monied groups while taking away direct democracy opportunities from volunteer-led organizations like the League.

We also oppose increasing the passage rate to 60%. If the policy reason for these changes is that higher voter support should be needed for a change to the Ohio Constitution, this same need for higher support should apply to constitutional amendments proposed by the Ohio General Assembly.

The League asserts that the best way to protect the sanctity of the Ohio Constitution would be to ease the initiated statute process. Current law requires a similar effort to place a statute onto the ballot as it does for a constitutional amendment, but a statute can easily be overturned or changed by the Ohio General Assembly. Reducing the signature requirements and instituting a safe harbor of 5 – 10 years would encourage more citizen-led campaigns to choose the initiated statute process over amending the Ohio Constitution.

Finally, I want to reflect upon the growing coalition against HJR 19. More than 60 organizations from public health, faith, labor, environmental, good governance, and other sectors have raised their voices against this initiative through a coalition letter that was sent to the General Assembly this morning. Such broad opposition indicates how poorly these proposed policy changes are constructed, while also signaling that such an attempt would be ill-fated at the ballot box.

I ask that you abandon this effort, because changes to how the people of Ohio can affect the Constitution as well as how we reduce the influence of money in Ohio politics deserve greater care and conversation than this setting provides. You can contact me at director@lwvohio.org or 614-469-1505.

Thank you.