



Testimony Opposing HJR19 from Mia Lewis, Common Cause Ohio

Ohio House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee
Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and members of the Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Mia Lewis. I am the Campaigns Coordinator at Common Cause Ohio. In addition, I spent many hours collecting signatures for the Fair Districts = Fair Elections ballot initiative and subsequently worked to help pass Issue 1 of May 2018. Common Cause Ohio is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization and we are committed to open, honest, and accountable government that serves the public interest and empowers all people to make their voices heard in the political process. We are strongly opposed to House Joint Resolution 19.

Regular Ohioans need and deserve access to direct democracy: it's our *safety valve* to make sure lawmakers aren't only listening to donors and lobbyists. There are 1,550 lobbyists whose job it is to get your attention. You see them frequently at the Statehouse and know many of them on a first name basis. It can be hard for regular citizens to compete with their tenacity and omnipresence. In fact, it seems that issues of great concern to citizens often go unaddressed (access to healthcare; clean air and water; fair school funding), while more obscure matters are taken up with urgency (banning cities from charging 5¢ for plastic bags—despite the fact that Ohio is a home rule state). Win or lose, citizen ballot initiatives are a proven and effective way for regular Ohioans to pressure their lawmakers and force them to pay attention to citizens' concerns.

HJR 19 seems to be a cure for a problem that doesn't exist. We are not currently awash in a sea of citizen initiatives that are irrelevant to our needs and easy to pass: since 1950, only TEN out

of 44 ballot measures have passed, a mere 23%. Ohioans tend to be cautious about an initiative when they are unfamiliar with it. Let's not fix what isn't broken.

Keep in mind that the bar on citizens' initiatives has just been raised by the voters: record turnout in November 2018 means that the signatures requirement to get a citizen initiative on the ballot just jumped by more than 41%, from 305,591 to 431,809. That's 431,000+ VALID signatures—something like 750,000 would be necessary to ensure validity. With just 180 days to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures, between October and April (when volunteers and voters are least likely to be available), only those with deep enough pockets to hire an army of signature collectors will stand a chance. Rather than saving Ohioans from out-of-state, "Dark Money" funded initiatives, HJR 19 will ensure that *only those kinds of efforts will succeed*. It will put the nail in the coffin of local, grassroots initiatives powered by enthusiastic volunteers. To make sure citizen groups and volunteers have a shot, it would make better sense to *lower* the requirements.

As I already mentioned, most often citizen initiatives do not pass. But win or lose, pass or fail—or even when the signature requirement is not met and the initiative doesn't make it onto the ballot—these efforts at direct democracy are a huge net plus for Ohio citizens. Ohioans have benefitted when citizen initiated measures have passed (e.g. minimum wage); when they have failed (e.g. redistricting 2005/early vote); and even when they didn't make it to the ballot (e.g. farm animal protections). The list of positive results is long. At the very least, direct democracy is an effective way to make the legislature respond with their own legislation to citizens' concerns. Let's not take away something that works well to improve lives in Ohio.

What, exactly, is the impetus for HJR19? Issue 1 from November 2018? It didn't even come close to passing. Nevertheless, it sought a solution to a devastating problem that legislators have failed to adequately address. It succeeded in focusing attention on the opioid crisis in our state, the wasted money, the wasted lives, the staggering (and mostly misdirected) expense. It helped to boost voter turnout significantly, especially among younger voters. I'm going to assume that everyone here agrees it's a tremendous victory when turnout increases, especially among young voters—who usually show up to vote at a disappointingly low rate. Engaging the next generation is a wonderful thing for the continued health and strength of our democracy. And we all believe in democracy and hope for functional government. Government of the people, by the people, for the people. Increased participation strengthens our connection to our government. I've seen and experienced it first hand.

Here's a dirty little secret about representative democracy: it's complicated, and not that many people are paying attention. How many people know who their state rep is, or what bills are

being argued in the General Assembly? Not that many. That's too bad, because what you discuss and decide here at the Ohio Statehouse is enormously significant to all of us. Working to pass a ballot initiative is a fantastic way for volunteers to engage, learn more, and deepen their involvement with democracy. In turn, having those citizen volunteers out in the street advocating for ballot initiatives they know and care about is a great way to educate, involve, and motivate citizens. We should be encouraging more participation and engagement in the political process, not less.

Direct democracy challenges the state legislature to do better. Any effort to roll back the ballot initiative process is an attempt to silence the voices of millions of Ohio voters. I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I will now take any questions you may have.

Mia Lewis
Common Cause Ohio