Testimony on SJR 5

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak again on the issue of redistricting. After testifying in the fall, I was disappointed to see the way the way Senator Huffman framed SJR 5 because this resolution does not go far enough toward taking party politics out of redistricting. Rather, it continues to vest too much control of the process in the Assembly itself. Instead of arguing the demerits of SJR 5 and the merits of the citizen’s initiative today, however, I want to focus on the political import of this resolution.

I was among those joining the Women’s March this year, in my case in Newark, where some 50-100 were projected to show up while the count was instead well over 200. New about the march in 2018 was its spreading into towns across America, such as Newark and Gettysburg where my daughter lives, while also maintaining its strength in the bigger cities. Because the marches were more dispersed, estimates of numbers this year are still difficult, but a good estimate at this point exceeds 2 million participants in the US and another 2 plus million abroad.

Organizers this year used the phrase “Power to the polls,” and the tagline, “Last year they heard our voice. This year they’ll hear our vote.” The newly pragmatic focus of the march was on preparing voters for the 2018 elections. Marchers this year were urged to help register voters using a new mobile app, and as the year moves toward the general election, to keep registering voters and motivating them to go to the polls. Will this effort bear fruit? Already since the first march a year ago, 26 thousand women across the country have been emboldened to run for office. Will Power to the Polls commensurately increase voter participation?

The League of Women Voters has long decried the low rate of participation in elections so it applauds all efforts to register voters and get them to the polls. It is also true, however, that when turnout is low, a small group of motivated voters may have an outsized impact.

I am sure that many voters this year *will* be motivated by the issue of redistricting. Having circulated the Fair District petition starting last June and going right up to this Saturday at the March in Newark, I sense that more people understand this issue, thanks in part to the 100s of volunteers who have circulated petitions and educated voters in the process. I no longer need to explain as often what gerrymandering is.

For another thing, gerrymandering is in the national news almost weekly, first with the Wisconsin case before the Supreme Court, now with stories in the press about North Carolina, Texas, and Pennsylvania. As for Ohio, the press in Columbus, Cleveland, and elsewhere has also carried stories, editorials, and letters to the editor about redistricting. And this coverage has been consistently in favor of the Fair Districts initiative and, recently, has expressed disappointment about SJR 5.

As the Assembly votes on SJR 5, or perhaps some other version, members should anticipate, then, that organizations such as the League of Women Voters and others in the FD coalition, the press, and the hundreds of volunteers who have circulated petitions will be watching closely. Which representatives will vote to keep control of the redistricting process in the Assembly? Will any suggest that the Fair Districts model would better against the process from party interests? Many eyes will be following the outcome of this vote.

If SJR 5 makes it to the ballot in May, I suspect that voters will indeed be motivated to get to the polls. And as November approaches, with half the seats for the Senate and all of those for Representative at stake, the Fair Districts coalition will deliberately remind voters of how representatives stood on this important issue.

Thank you.