



Testimony by Camille Wimbish, Ohio Fair Courts Alliance
On House Bill 149
Before the Ohio House Government and Oversight Committee
May 20, 2021

Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Ohio House Government and Oversight Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony to House Bill 149 – a bill that threatens to manipulate the outcome of our judicial elections, by providing partisan labels for some judicial candidates, but not all. This testimony is on behalf of the Ohio Fair Courts Alliance, a statewide network of organizations, community leaders and concerned citizens. We are dedicated to creating a court system that exemplifies and protects equity, fairness and justice for all. Our goal is to increase participation rates in judicial elections, and improve the quality and diversity of judges selected for the bench.

The Ohio Fair Courts Alliance conducts non-partisan programming to educate the public about the role of judges and the importance of our courts. We provide presentations to various community groups about the different types of courts, the role of judges, and how judges are selected. Many Ohioans admit that they wish they knew more about the judicial candidates running in their communities, and we whole-heartedly agree that more needs to be done to provide voters with factual information about judicial candidates. Unfortunately, HB 149 does not provide voter education fairly or uniformly for all judicial races. This failure tilts the balance of select judicial races in favor of one party over the other.

A fair and impartial judiciary starts with fair and free elections. This proposal reflects a troubling political calculus that party labels would be advantageous for Republican judicial candidates in statewide elections, but decidedly less advantageous for county and municipal judge seats, where Democratic candidates have traditionally fared better in urban areas. This approach of party labels for some, but not for all doesn't pass the smell test. Lawmakers should stop playing politics with our courts and keep their thumbs off the scale of justice.

If partisan manipulation was not the intent of this bill, we urge you to take up a thorough debate of whether party affiliations should be listed for *all* judicial races. We all know that courts are essential to securing our rights as voters, business owners, workers, and members of the community. At the end of the day, all Ohioans want is a fair shake from our judges, but that can't happen if we continue to politicize our judiciary. Thank you for your consideration.

Camille Wimbish
Ohio Fair Courts Alliance