

Testimony in opposition to House Joint Resolution 6

Thank you, Chairman Wilkin, and the committee members, for allowing me to provide testimony on House Joint Resolution 6 (HJR 6)

In 1912, Ohio citizens won the right to put initiatives on the ballot. In the next 100+ years, citizens drafted and voted on more than 60 initiatives. Examples include banning taxes on food, raising the minimum wage, capping the cost of prescription drugs, and setting term limits for some elected officials. As you know, HJR 6 will make it harder for citizens to impact how they are governed. Instead of a simple majority, ballot initiatives must be approved by a super-majority, by 60% of the voters, in order to become law.

One might assume that this suppression of direct democracy was deemed necessary because citizens were far too eager to change the constitution. However, ballot initiatives have been rejected by voters more often than they were approved. The current criterion of 50% plus one vote has been a difficult hurdle to overcome. Two initiatives giving women the right to vote were defeated at the polls. Voters rejected two citizen-led attempts to revise the procedure for drawing legislative districts. In 1983, an initiative to repeal all previous taxes received only 44% of the vote. No evidence has been offered that citizens are abusing their right to amend the constitution.

Secretary of State Frank LaRose stated that the purpose of HJR6 was to make it harder for “special interests” to influence laws. If that is indeed the goal, a better way to accomplish it would be through campaign finance and lobbying reforms. Pass a law to stop billionaires and corporations from dumping money into the electoral process. HJR 6 would not have prevented the First Energy corporation from spending 60 million dollars to persuade lawmakers to give them a government bailout. Citizens have to work very hard to get an initiative on the ballot. If HJR 6 is passed, it will be easier for well-moneyed interests to stop these initiatives.

Before voting on an issue, members of the General Assembly may get feedback from a subset of the voters in their districts, and use this feedback to claim they are fulfilling the wishes of the citizens. However, the consensus from that sample of constituents may not be representative of the majority of the voters in the state. If citizens believe that the General Assembly is out of step with the majority of the voters, one of the few remedies they have is to place an initiative on the ballot.

The initiative allowing citizens to amend the constitution passed with 57.5 percent of the vote, a margin of victory that many candidates would be happy with. <http://www.iandrinstute.org/states/state.cfm?id=21> Citizens voted for the right to amend the constitution. You in the General Assembly have no just cause to take it from us.

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