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**To: House Constitutional Resolutions Committee
Chairman Plummer, Representative Stewart**

From: Rob Sexton, Special Consultant

Date: April 17, 2023

Re: Support for HJR 1

Mr. Chairman, members of the House Constitutional Resolutions Committee, I am here to testify on behalf of the Sportsmen's Alliance and our members and supporters throughout Ohio who strongly support House Joint Resolution 1. The Sportsmen's Alliance was founded in 1977 right here in Columbus, Ohio, and protects the rights of Americans to hunt, fish and trap. We are still headquartered here in Columbus today. Although we're local, our national work has given us a perspective on this issue that will be very helpful to committee members.

The Sportsmen's Alliance was founded in response to a pending ballot issue that would have banned all trapping in Ohio. Since defeating that issue, the organization has either directly managed or provided critical strategic campaign services to oppose a total of 29 ballot issues in 14 states, including two here in Ohio, that attempted to ban various hunting opportunities.

We've learned a lot about ballot issues over our 46-year history, and here are the facts that will be of assistance to this committee as you deliberate on HJR 1. In general terms, when it comes to ballot campaigns, the side that spends the most money wins. Our side has won 17 of the 29 ballot issues we have fought and lost 12. The side that spent the most money prevailed on 28 of the 29 occasions.

The intent of the ballot initiative, when it became popular in the early 20th century, was to allow the people to have a route to change laws when the legislature did not act. In Ohio the people have this right to overturn a law passed by the General Assembly through a referendum. They also have the ability to initiate a change in statute. In both cases, the margin for passage is a simple majority, and we take no issue with this. Likewise, House Joint Resolution 1 makes no change to the people's rights to directly change our laws.

But even the qualification process of ballot issues makes them vulnerable to wealthy and elite interests. In my 28 year career with the Sportsmen's Alliance, I cannot recall a single anti-hunting ballot issue that did not qualify for the ballot without the use of professional petition management signature gathering firms, from places like California, where ballot issues are very common. Firms like these bring in teams from out of state, and cost hundreds of thousands and in some cases millions of dollars. No grassroots campaign of Ohioans can afford this kind of expense.

This history provides even more evidence that steps must be taken to protect our constitution specifically because it is different than a simple statutory change or referendum. The Constitution is the foundational document of our state that enshrines the rights of free people and provides restraints on our government. As such it holds a much higher importance to our lives than statutes or regulations. It is the framework under which all actions of our three branches of government must act. And because of this essential fact, changes to this foundational document must be of greater significance and import.

We're in an era where big money in politics often rules the day. Where six figure checks are donated to campaigns at a record pace, and millions are spent to influence elections. In our case we've raised funds for ballot issues from modest contributions averaging less than \$100 each, often taking up to 2 years to assemble enough funds to mount a defense of our hunting rights. But the growing expense of mass media is quickly diminishing the ability of the general populace to raise the needed funds to win through grassroots efforts along these lines.

The voice of the people, as envisioned by those who conceived of the citizen initiative process, is being drowned out by billionaires and organizations with hundreds of millions, if not billions, in annual assets are swamping the populist ideal that was the reason for creating this process in the first place. Voters in states across the country are faced with Constitutional Ballot Issues on a regular basis now, and in almost all cases, these fights are driven by individuals and groups that often have nothing in common with main-street America.

And that is the crux of our testimony. While many feel it is important to allow the people to have this right of redress, we must have a balance. We must take steps to ensure that only the most important issues rise to the level where changes to our constitution are appropriate. We cannot allow the Ohio Constitution to become for sale, changed at the whim of the wealthy. House Joint Resolution 1 accomplishes this goal by raising the threshold of passage for a constitutional change to 60%.

This is not an unprecedented idea. Our own state legislature cannot propose a change to the Ohio Constitution unless 60% of the House and Senate agree. Our framers understood then, as we know now, that the Ohio Constitution is special, and as such requires an extra level of care and protection. The framers of our United States Constitution deliberately designed a high bar to change our country's foundational documents, requiring 2/3 of both house of Congress AND ratification by ¾ of the states! Ohio's Constitution needs to be equally protected, and HJR 1 does just that.

Ohio's sportsmen and women are people of modest means. And yet their lifestyle creates a multibillion-dollar impact on our economy. Our heritage is passed down from generation to generation, and times together in the field with family and friends is greatly cherished. Our willingness to pay license fees and taxes on hunting and fishing gear finances our system of fish and wildlife conservation that makes America the envy of the rest of the world.

We don't ask for applause. We do so gladly. But what we don't deserve is to have our rights put up for sale to the highest bidder, bringing their out of state values to change how we live. For these important reasons, the Sportsmen's Alliance, on behalf of our Ohio members and supporters ask for your quick deliberation and approval of HJR 1.