

Chairman Plummer, Vice Chair Hillyer, Ranking Member Mohamed, and other members of the Constitutional Resolutions Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I regret that I am unable to travel to Columbus to appear before the committee, but I hope that you will take my testimony into consideration as you decide how to proceed on HJR 1.

My name is Laura Rushton. I am a retired teacher and an active volunteer in Strongsville. I have always been engaged in the democratic process, and as an elementary school teacher, I considered it my highest calling to teach my students how to be active citizens of a democracy. I took my class on yearly visits to the Statehouse, where they met their representatives and learned how laws are made and amended. In the beginning of the year, each class took part in drafting its own Constitution, and as problems arose, we solved them with reference to the rights and responsibilities it conferred on them.

The principle of One Person, One Vote is fundamental to our democracy. Since 1912, our state charter has given the people the right to amend the Constitution to address changing conditions and matters of broad public interest. The current process for citizen initiatives is not undertaken lightly, because it requires the gathering of hundreds of thousands of verified signatures just to put it on the ballot, and then a majority of voters must approve it. I have collected signatures and I know that is hard work, requiring dedication and perseverance on the part of many committed individuals across the state.

The proposal to raise the passage threshold to 60 % would make this already challenging process almost impossible. It is unnecessary, and it subverts the will of the majority by allowing a minority to defeat a popular initiative. For example, if the vote is 55 % in favor, 45% opposed, the initiative will fail, despite the fact that less than half of the electorate voted against it.

Simply put, HJR 1 effectively hobbles our ability as citizens to go directly to the voters on issues that are of great interest and urgency to the public. Ohioans have had this right for over 100 years, and there have been many amendments that failed to pass under the current rules. Why change the rules now, other than to demonstrate a lack of faith in the voters' judgment? In recent decades, corporate lobbyists and outside groups have had a disproportionate influence on our state laws because of the money they can spend to get bills passed. Our Constitution gives us a fair process for ordinary citizens to approve changes that the people want and need. If this General Assembly decides to make that goal unattainable, they will have done a great disservice to the people of Ohio by silencing their voice. It will reinforce a corrupt system in which monied special interests control the state's agenda. Even worse, it breaks the public trust at a time when confidence in government is already dangerously low.

As Theodore Roosevelt said when he addressed the Ohio Constitutional Convention in 1912, "I protest against any theory that would make of the constitution a means of thwarting instead of securing the absolute right of the people to rule themselves."