

Testimony in Opposition to House Joint Resolution 1

Thank you, Chairman Plummer, and the committee members, for allowing me to provide testimony in opposition to House Joint Resolution 1 (HJR 1). My name is Debbie Dalke, and I live in Bowling Green.

Americans cherish democracy. It's the source of our liberty and freedoms. All Americans are governed by representative democracy, but only some states have direct democracy. Citizens of Ohio chose, through a constitutional amendment, to have direct democracy. Voters decided that ordinary citizens could draft laws and put them on the ballot. Voters gave ordinary citizens the power to repeal laws made by the General Assembly.

I am here because the General Assembly is attempting to erode our direct democracy. As you know, HJR 1 will make it harder for citizens to amend the constitution. Signatures will need to be collected from all 88 counties instead of 44, and petitioners will not be given additional time to collect signatures if they fall short of the required number. If citizens manage to get an initiative on the ballot, a supermajority of voters, 60%, must vote in favor of the initiative for it to become law. This criterion will allow 41% of voters to overrule the majority. This is clearly unfair and clearly undemocratic.

I struggle to understand why it is necessary to suppress direct democracy. Are citizens far too eager to change the constitution? This cannot be the case, because 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. The additional challenges posed by HJR 1 are unnecessary. No evidence has been offered that citizens are abusing their right to amend the constitution.

Secretary of State LaRose stated that the purpose of HJR 1 was to make it harder for "special interests" to influence laws. If this is indeed the goal, a better way to accomplish it would be through campaign finance and lobbying reforms. Stop billionaires and corporations from dumping money into the electoral process. If HJR 1 is passed, it will be easier for well-moneyed interests to defeat an initiative that hundreds of thousands of citizens wanted on the ballot.

To understand the impact that HJR 1 might have, we can look at initiatives that were approved, but would have been defeated had HJR 1 been in effect. In 1923, an amendment was proposed to remove "white male" as requirements for voting. The amendment was approved by 56% of the voters, ensuring that women and people of color had the right to vote. In 1982, 57% of voters granted the state permission to issue bonds for low-income housing. In 2006, an amendment to increase the minimum wage was passed with 57% of the vote. When I taught college classes, I knew students who worked too many hours to pay their tuition, and this often interfered with their academics. Also on the ballot was an amendment to restrict smoking in public places, which 58% of voters approved. All of these positive changes would have been stopped by HJR 1.

From this list of successes, we can determine who has benefitted from constitutional amendments. It was women, people of color, people with low incomes, and anyone who escaped the toxic effects of cigarette smoke. HJR 1 will stop human interests, not special interests.

The members of the General Assembly were chosen by the voters. To be elected, you needed to win a simple majority of votes. If you trust this criterion for your own election, why isn't it good enough for direct democracy? I urge you to vote "no" on HJR 1. Ohioans want more democracy, not less.

Debbie Dalke, 15325 Sand Ridge Road, Bowling Green, Ohio