

Proponent Testimony
House Bill 21
Ohio Association of Election Officials

Chairman Peterson, Vice-Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Forhan and members of the House Government Oversight Committee:

My name is Gail Garbrandt and I am the Director of the Tuscarawas County Board of Elections. I also serve on the legislative committee of the Ohio Association of Election Officials (OAEO). It is my pleasure to offer my association's support for House Bill 21. We would like to thank Representative Dan Troy and all the co-sponsors for putting forward this important legislation.

OAEO is a bipartisan organization representing Ohio's 88 county boards of elections as well as the professional staff that manages the operations of the boards. To a person, our organization is humbled by the honor of administering our country's most sacred right, the right to vote. We take seriously this responsibility and understand the importance of providing this body with feedback and perspective on proposed legislation impacting the administration of our elections in Ohio.

With this in mind, we enthusiastically encourage your support for HB 21. It is the long-held position of OAEO that all primaries in the state of Ohio should be held in the month of May. As the committee is certainly aware, current law provides that three of the primary elections within a four-year cycle are held in May, while only the presidential primary is held in March. Our support for this legislation is twofold. First, moving the presidential primary to May is voter friendly. Second, this move eases the administration of elections and saves taxpayer dollars.

With regard to the first point, holding a presidential primary in May creates consistency for voters, which is incredibly important. It is our experience that voters are most engaged when election processes and procedures are uniform, consistent, and easily understandable for our voters. Amongst other things, we strive to keep polling locations the same from election to election and voting systems are seldom changed. The glaring exception to this pattern is our one primary election held in the month of March. Furthermore, March can create unique challenges for voters with unpredictable weather such as winter snow and ice storms. In the past, counties have had to shut down or move polling locations due to power outages caused by ice, and turnout has suffered when snow creates hazardous road conditions. In short, May is a much better option for our voters.

With regard to the second point, the aforementioned weather issues also create problems for election administrators. Whether it is delays in delivering voting equipment to polling locations due to bad weather, or making sure poll workers arrive safely to their precincts, weather causes real and significant logistical issues in election administration. Additionally, many of our poll workers are retired, and we always lose a certain percentage of them in presidential primaries as the “snow birds” have yet to return to Ohio. This of course causes stresses to find replacement precinct election officials. Finally, because the filing deadline is 90 days before the primary, in Presidential elections, that deadline often falls around the holidays, meaning boards of elections have to find staff to count signatures when most people are on vacation or taking time off. It is not uncommon for boards of elections to pay overtime in order to find the extra staff we need to complete these tasks.

Finally, I would note that our support for this measure is based solely on our viewpoints as election administrators and is not based on any political implications the bill may have for one or both political parties.

However, it must be noted that opposition to this bill often focuses on the belief that a March primary allows Ohio to be a “player” in helping the parties select their presidential nominees. Unfortunately, this belief is simply not accurate. Facts bear out that the last time Ohio was relevant in the nominating process was 1992 when the Democratic nomination was still up for grabs by the time Ohio’s primary was held. Although that primary was ultimately swayed by California, whose primary was the same day as Ohio’s, it should be noted that both of those state’s primaries that year were held on June 2nd.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.