



**Opponent Testimony: Senate Bill 153
Senate General Government Committee
Jen Miller, League of Women Voters of Ohio
May 27, 2025**

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Blackshear, and esteemed committee:

Thank you for your time today. As the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio (LWVO), I'm offering in-person opposition party testimony on behalf of 4,000 dues-paying members and volunteers, who live in every Ohio Senate District in the Buckeye State.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio is a nonpartisan organization that was founded over one hundred years ago by leaders of Ohio's women's suffrage movement. Our mission from the beginning was to create more meaningful pathways for newly enfranchised women to be civically engaged. Since then, we have been a champion of fair, transparent, and responsible democratic systems and robust, informed civic engagement among all Ohioans.

We have a long track record of advocacy success. In the 1930s, we began securing improved ballot construction so that all candidates could be treated fairly and got Ohio to adopt transparent, bipartisan recounting protocols for close elections in the 1940s. We were one of the first to champion Ohio's bipartisan system of election planning, administration, and oversight. We helped secure mail-in voter registration, online voter registration, no-excuse absentee voting, early voting, and Youth and the Booth. Ohio first required post election audits and election administration plans in response to litigation the League brought after the 2004 election. More recently, we supported SB 52, sponsored by Senator Gavarone, that codified audits and modernized many other aspects of election security.

We are fiercely nonpartisan. We never endorse candidates or parties. We have no permanent enemies and no permanent friends. Our priority is and always will be voters. We seek to balance public policy goals of secure elections, fair election administration, and access for voters. That is why I stand here today in opposition to Senate Bill 153.

The proposed bill is massive, expensive, and dangerous. It would revise over forty sections of Ohio Revised Code that govern elections and establish three new sections. This bill is unnecessary. This past December, Secretary LaRose announced a 99.9% accuracy rate for 2024 general post election audits, further stating that "Ohioans deserve to know that their elections are transparent, accessible, and accountable."

SB 153 would disenfranchise tens if not hundreds of thousands of eligible Ohio voters, add unnecessary, unfunded mandates for Boards of Elections (BOEs), and hinder Ohioans' right to direct democracy. Ohio's democratic processes are already safe, secure, and accurate. The provisions do not solve public policy problems; they only create additional barriers to civic engagement and increase burdens on already overworked and underresourced BOEs.

Last week, the League was honored to stand with allies to release an organizational sign-on letter opposing SB 153 and HB 233. The letter includes support from over 130 organizations statewide, spanning religious groups, good government organizations, labor unions, and professional associations.

SB 153 would harm Ohio citizens by making direct democracy even harder. SB 153 would make signature collection for citizen initiatives and referendums much more challenging and expensive through nit-picky regulations that would result in more signatures getting thrown out. Simple clerical errors by circulators could result in the invalidation of entire booklets.

While the League is a big proponent of transparency, requiring badges for "compensated" circulators will result in confused voters and harassed campaign volunteers. Anyone who has been part of a candidate or issue campaign knows that volunteers need trained, fed, and inspired. This bill would require volunteers to wear compensation badges too, even if all they received was a cup of coffee, a slice of pizza, or some campaign swag to wear.

Voters could think that a circulator is getting a paycheck, when in fact they are simply a concerned citizen practicing their right to direct democracy as a volunteer. We should expect opposition to candidates or issue campaigns to have trackers that attempt to catch circulators without their badges. With the increase in uncivil and polarized rhetoric in political venues, this could result in a loss of campaign volunteers as well as intimidation or violence against circulators or those signing petitions.

The legislation also includes provisions that seem designed to intimidate everyday Ohioans from getting out their clipboards to collect signatures for candidates, local issues, statewide initiatives, and referendums in the first place. The changes to the "Statement of Circulator" will deter many law-abiding, concerned citizen volunteers from signature collection, as it appears that they would be required to preemptively agree to political investigations and relinquish due process rights before collecting even one signature with the following language:

"For the purposes of any proceeding related to this petition, I submit to the jurisdiction of the courts of the State of Ohio, the Ohio Secretary of State, and the board of elections of the county in which I have circulated this petition. I understand that I may be required to testify or to produce evidence in such a proceeding. I agree to receive any service of process at the residence address I have provided."

SB 153 harms local governments, small businesses, and local candidates too, since these strict petition rules would apply to everyone trying to get someone or something on the ballot, like a

liquor ordinance for a small business, proposed zoning change for housing, new charter amendments for better government, or a school board candidate. In 2021, the Heritage Foundation wrote: “Local government can have the most direct impact on our daily lives... We must protect our local governments from those with tyrannical tendencies that threaten our freedom.” This legislation defies those sentiments as it directly attacks local control and local governance.

SB153 would help fuel Ohio’s dark money problem further. By adding so many more reasons to invalidate signatures and reduce the number of campaign volunteers willing to do signature collection, the new petition process would favor candidates and issue campaigns that have deep pockets, likely from dark money. Those campaigns without the infrastructure and financial backing of the major political parties and/or corporate donors would be especially hurt by the proposed petition rules. Ultimately, this legislation will harm independent and underdog candidates as well as any group of concerned citizens seeking to make change through the issue petition process, which has been a fundamental right enshrined in the Ohio Constitution since 1912.

SB 153 would harm Ohio voters by banning drop boxes, which are a secure, efficient, and direct method of submitting voter registration forms, absentee request forms, absentee ballots, and campaign finance filings. Some counties even use them for interoffice mail between departments. Drop boxes weigh as much as 600 pounds, are bolted to the ground, have 24-hour video surveillance, are emptied by election workers of two different party affiliations, and are weather and fire resistant. Utilizing drop boxes is more direct than using the mail service, and allows those who cannot make it to the BOE during business hours to conduct their business with the BOE securely, efficiently, and directly.

Rather than banning drop boxes, this body should allow multiple drop box locations per county. This one location rule already harms those who do not live close to the county seat and/or do not drive, including rural Ohioans, seniors, voters with disabilities, low-income voters, and those who work during the BOE business hours. There is absolutely no justification to make access even harder.

If enacted, HB 153 would increase provisional voting exponentially— even Ohioans who haven't moved or changed their name would be required to vote provisionally for minor clerical differences between their voter registration and voter ID, like one listing a middle initial while the other has that field blank. Those voters would then only have four days after Election Day to get an updated voter ID that has the name displayed exactly the same as the voter registration file for their ballot to count.

This legislation would also require Ohioans to provide proof of citizenship documents. If they did not or could not, they would have to vote provisionally and provide proof within just four days for their ballot to count. But voters whose current legal name is different from what appears on their proof of citizenship documents would have more red tape that may be challenging to overcome. Approximately 75% of Ohio’s 3.5 million married women have changed their names, but may not have kept that documentation.

Rural Ohioans, which are 24% of the state's population, are twice as likely to not have access to birth certificates or passports for proof of citizenship. Approximately 14% of senior citizens don't have access to birth certificates or passports either. If this legislation passes, members of the military and their families, people with disabilities, youth, low-income and housing insecure individuals, as well as other marginalized populations would also struggle to register to vote.

SB 153 burdens election officials and election workers, and it is the very definition of an "unfunded mandate," with countless increases in statutory obligations for BOEs without any additional resources from the state of Ohio. The removal of drop boxes, intensive changes to voter roll maintenance, and increased provisional ballot rates will likely increase lines for in-person voting and would require massive increases in staffing for busywork that would not make our elections more secure, but will make our elections more expensive and less accessible.

Some of the requirements of this bill will be incredibly arduous, if not impossible, to implement such as requiring a voter's registration to be correct on the date they signed the petition rather than on the date that the campaign submitted the petitions. It is unclear if every county has a voter registration database that can even track or query that data accurately. Regardless, this step alone will cause great strain on BOEs, but it doesn't stop there.

BOEs would be required to investigate and enforce compliance with all these new petition and circulator rules at the local level. BOEs would become "badge police" in which they would have to investigate reports of "compensated" circulators not wearing badges. BOEs won't just be required to investigate alleged violations, they will also have to work with other government entities, such as county prosecutors and local courts, to issue subpoenas and/or prosecute violations. Roles that many BOEs do not have qualified staff to fulfill, let alone the staff time. Finally, they would have to be the face of these new regulations telling candidates and issue campaigns that record numbers of signatures by otherwise eligible Ohio voters will be thrown out for nitpicky technical reasons.

SB 153 poorly timed. Elections officials still aren't able to implement all of the Data Act, because of technical challenges and/or financial constraints. Rulemaking still needs to be conducted for parts of HB 74. While we supported several provisions within HB74, I feel it is necessary to remind everyone here that BOEs are already dealing with regulatory uncertainty.

Some of the smaller counties struggle to compete with fast food restaurants for staff, because their pay is so low. Now you want to add significant amounts of busywork and interpersonal strain with candidates and issue campaigns, which could likely cause a mass exodus of elections officials. Turnover at BOEs and the related loss of institutional knowledge threaten our elections. You can easily prevent this by rejecting this legislation and actually trying to work with BOEs on policy improvements that address actual problems.

SB 153 is unnecessary. We have routinely heard from Secretary LaRose as well as the previous Secretary of State before him, now US Senator Husted, that it is hard to cheat and easy to vote

in Ohio. After signing HB458, Dewine stated that he has "long believed that Ohio does a good of administering elections... I do not expect to see any further statutory changes to Ohio voting procedures while I am Governor."

Every Ohio citizen is considered equal and must continue to be empowered to participate in government as voters, petition circulators, and advocates. Please reject this legislation, which would inflict harm on local governments, local businesses, taxpayers, candidates, voters, concerned volunteers with clipboards, and boards of elections.

You can contact me to discuss this legislation or other democracy matters further at director@lwvohio.org or 614-469-1505.

Thank you.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio was formed in May 1920 out of Ohio's woman suffrage movement. The League is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.