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Written Testimony in Opposition to HJR1 Ohio House Constitutional Resolutions Committee April 19, 2023

Thank you, Chair and Members of the Ohio House Constitutional Resolutions Committee for the opportunity to provide written testimony in opposition to HJR1.

My name is Tracy Grinstead-Everly. I am a social justice attorney and proudly submit this testimony on behalf of the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section (NCJW), The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (The RAC), and our thousands of members across the state of Ohio, who support the continued right to an accessible, citizen-led ballot initiative process.

NCJW is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. Throughout its history, NCJW has worked to expand voting rights, drive voter turnout, educate on the issues, and engage advocates. That work continues, nationally and locally, through a number of our interconnected programs, such as Promote the Vote, Protect the Vote and our dedication to protecting reproductive rights and abortion access. We are a nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping citizens understand the political process and issues at stake, with the ultimate goal being meaningful government engagement with all eligible voters.

The RAC has worked for more than six decades to educate, inspire, and mobilize the Reform Jewish Movement to advocate for social justice. We have helped activate the Jewish community in the key debates and mobilizations of each generation since our founding, from the civil rights movement to immigration reform.

While HJR1 tries to portray itself as simple process legislation, it is a civil rights violation in disguise. A right is only as legitimate as one's ability to exercise it. HJR1 does not remove impediments to governance – it creates obstacles for the people who are working to be informed and involved about decisions that directly impact them. That is why we urge you to reject it.

For more than 100 years, Ohio citizens have had the right to use ballot initiatives to have a say in their government. At a time when people are increasingly less confident in the political process and their government officials, we should be encouraging government transparency and participation in our democratic process. Instead, through HJR1, this body would make it harder for people to make their voices heard, requiring signatures from every single county in the state to allow citizen-led initiatives to even appear on the ballot, and a supermajority vote for passage. Further, removing the brief “cure period” after signatures are turned in creates an additional, unnecessary obstacle to allowing critical issues to be decided by the will of the people.

These significant proposed changes are particularly troubling given the process being followed. NCJW and many others opposed the prior iteration of this bill last session (**OH HJR6 | 2021-2022**). At that time, we noted with concern the undemocratic maneuvering of refusing to introduce the issue to be debated and voted on in a general election, the House instead attempting to rush it through hearings during lame duck session. This systemic manipulation failed, however, and the bill died in chamber.

This time around, the stakes are higher, and the tactics more devious. Should this bill pass, the changes would be posed at a traditionally low-voter-turn-out special election, selected by legislators whose desire to score personal political capital is far outweighed by the fiscal cost for which they themselves eliminated the special elections less than one year ago. The purpose of this chess game of disenfranchisement and suppression of direct voter involvement is simple: the hope to keep one particular issue off the ballot and out of the hands of the people.

Our political system is not designed to change its process in response to a single issue. If there is an issue that is so seminal as to warrant that level of intense and universal social response, it stands to reason that it be debated openly, publicly and with as much honest and informed discussion as possible. A democratic state, established to protect against government suppression and built on the principles of free speech and expression, should welcome such deliberation, not thwart it. Yet, HJR1 seeks to limit civic engagement and discourse, and restrict constituents’ ability to propose Constitutional amendments.

That is not how democracy is supposed to work. This is not Oz. This is Ohio. Do not shout and tell us not to look behind the curtain. Let the people decide. Vote against HJR1.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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