



Opposition Testimony to House Bill 208
House Government Oversight Committee
Nazek Hapasha, League of Women Voters of Ohio
June 11, 2024

Chair Peterson, Vice Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Humphrey, esteemed members of the committee, and hard working legislative staff:

I am the Policy Affairs Manager of the League of Women Voters of Ohio. Our organization, our work, and our members are fiercely nonpartisan. We don't ever favor or support political parties or candidates in any way. The League's mission is to defend Ohio's democracy, and to empower Ohio voters - every single one of them - and our North Star is always voters. Both personally and professionally, I am passionate about ensuring that every voter has the opportunity to exercise their right to have a say in who their elected leaders are. With that, I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today in opposition to House Bill 208, and to tell you from our perspective why the main component of this bill is harmful to voters.

This bill would essentially accomplish two major things that should be disaggregated from one another. First, the bill would allow an elector to identify their political party affiliation, if they choose one, when they register to vote or update their voter registration status. To this we say yes, please! Our current system automatically affiliates a voter with a political party based on the ballot they choose to vote in the Primary, and does not allow them to update or change that affiliation except through voting in a Primary Election. This does not always truly reflect a voter's party preference.

Furthermore, voters may shift their preferences or values over time, and they should be able to more easily change their party affiliation. We have spoken to countless voters who are confused and upset when they find out they have to wait until a Primary Election comes around to change their party affiliation. The League is in favor of this portion of the bill, which would allow voters to convey their values through their party affiliation without having to wait for a Primary Election or being forced to cast a vote in that Primary Election.

The second thing this bill would do is require an elector to be registered as affiliated with a political party in order to vote that party's ballot in a Primary Election, making Ohio a closed primary state, which we unequivocally oppose. The League of Women Voters supports open primary election systems that permit all registered voters, regardless of political party membership, to participate. We believe that any proposal to restructure primary elections in Ohio should have as its goal to enfranchise the largest number of registered voters and to less partisan polarization.

Supporters of closed primary elections assert that parties have a right to allow only members to select nominees, and that open primaries allow non-party members to sabotage the nominating process. But closed primaries are fundamentally anti-democratic and disenfranchise voters by limiting participation in an essential part of our elections. This is especially true in states like Ohio where many of our congressional and statehouse races are decided in a Primary Election. Candidates themselves even campaign and fundraise on this fact in many districts, telling constituents that it is more important for them to fundraise for the Primary Election than the General, because the party's candidate is guaranteed a win in the General Election no matter who it is.

Our current party affiliation system already fails a significant portion of Ohio voters - Independents. Independents, or unaffiliated voters, are defined in Ohio as voters who did not cast a Republican or Democratic ballot in a Primary Election. But that is an inaccurate and narrow depiction of who an independent is. When most of us think about an independent voter, we envision someone who simply does not pledge allegiance to one party ideology or another, and who does not want to be affiliated with any political party. However we define them, many voters who identify as Independents choose to vote for a party ticket in the Primary, because they know it is likely their only chance for their vote to influence the outcome of the General Election in any given race.

Unaffiliated voters are the overwhelming majority of the Ohio electorate. Forcing electors to declare party identity upon registration effectively disenfranchises millions of voters who will be unable to vote in Primary Elections. There are many gerrymandered districts throughout Ohio in which one party or another is nearly guaranteed a win no matter who the candidate is that makes it to the General Election that year. The absence of these voters in a Primary would fundamentally undermine core principles of democracy. And even if district maps were fairly drawn, blocking a majority of voters from having a voice in who represents them is a frank violation of the one person, one vote foundation our government is built on.

No person's right to vote and have an equal say in who their elected leaders are should be affected by their lack of allegiance to a political party. The League of Women Voters of Ohio advocates for an open Primary Election system that permits all registered voters, regardless of political party membership, to participate in their democracy without restrictions. We oppose any attempts to take voting rights away from any Ohio citizen, and tying the right to vote to mandated declarations of party identification would prevent most Ohioans from fully exercising their right to vote.

The League of Women Voters recommends to this committee that the two main parts of this bill be disaggregated from one another. House Bill 208 should be amended to revise the voter registration process so that Ohio voters can easily and conveniently update their party affiliation WITHOUT affecting their ability or freedom to vote in any Primary Election. Thank you for your time and

consideration. Please do reach out to our office if you would like to discuss this further or have any questions.

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. The League has over 4000 members and 34 local Leagues across the Buckeye State.