



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF OHIO

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LWVO Interested Party Testimony on
HB 49 – State Budget
Senate Finance Committee
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Chairman Oelslager, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present interested party testimony on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Ohio (LWVO).

LWVO believes it is imperative to appropriate necessary funds to ensure the integrity of our election system. We urge this committee to include the following appropriations in the state budget to fund necessary election administration for 2017 and 2018.

The League continues to support three measures that would aid election officials in the administration of elections.

1. Absentee Ballot Application Mailing & Secure Online Paperless Option

We strongly urge you to renew the appropriation from the last budget to continue sending absentee ballot applications to all registered voters.

The absentee mailing is critical to smooth election administration, because voting patterns in Ohio have changed since the advent of no fault absentee voting in 2006. Currently, upwards of one third or more Ohio voters choose to cast their ballot before Election Day. Not going to the polls on Election Day has become an increasingly popular option in rural and urban counties alike. With these changing voting patterns, voters are accustomed to receiving their absentee applications in the mail.

Here is a little background on why this is so important. In recent years various county Boards of Elections (BOEs) have increasingly relied on absentee voting as an effective election administration tool to avoid unnecessary delays and excessively long Election Day lines. This is a much more efficient approach as opposed to the more expensive options of more voting machines, more poll workers, and the cost of additional precincts. In fact, many Ohio BOEs have taken advantage of this trend to consolidate precincts. Since 2008, Ohio has greatly reduced the number of precincts with a significant annual cost savings.

The county BOEs achieved these costs savings by reminding registered voters to take advantage of early voting options through mailing absentee voter application requests forms to all registered voters. With the passage of SB 205 two sessions ago, local BOEs were prohibited from sending out absentee ballot application mailings, and no government official other than the Secretary of State can send these applications to all voters. SB 205 further specified that the Secretary could continue sending absentee applications statewide only if the money is appropriated by the legislature.

We submit that if the money is not appropriated for this mailing, the recently established voting patterns in Ohio will likely be disrupted, causing confusion, delays, and unacceptably long lines at the polls -- as well as increased costs and staffing problems for the many county BOEs that have consolidated. The Secretary of State testified last session that this mailing "not only ensures that all eligible voters can conveniently vote without ever leaving home, but it helps ensure a smoother Election Day." Isn't this what we all want for Ohio?

However, we do recommend two modifications to what was appropriated two years ago in the last state budget.

First, we submit that if this legislature and the Secretary of State are truly committed to uniformity, then Ohio ought to send absentee applications every year, not just in even years. At the League of Women Voters Ohio office, we receive phone calls from voters every odd year asking why they didn't receive an application even though they vote every year. From a voter's standpoint, uniformity demands that applications be sent every year, and it could help boost Ohio's voter turnout in off-year elections.

Second, we urge you to permit secure online applications. Last session, the legislature authorized online voter registration, and the Secretary of State turned it live on January 1 of this year. Clearly, the technology exists. Allowing already registered voters to submit absentee applications online is more secure, efficient, and cost effective than relying solely on mailings. It saves county BOEs from having to process as many mailed applications, reduces the risk of data entry errors or hard to read handwriting, and it gets the application in the system faster so that BOEs can verify applications quicker. If Ohioans can register to vote online, pay our taxes online, renew a driver's license online, and more, then we should be able to file absentee applications online too.

2. Begin Replacing Aging Voting Machines

The Brennan Center for Justice last year warned that our aging voting machines are living on borrowed time. (See "America's Aging Voting Machines Managed to Survive Another Election," Nov. 10, 2016, <https://www.brennancenter.org/blog/americas-aging-voting-machines-managed-survive-another-election>).

We strongly support beginning to replace aging voting machines, with state financial assistance. We already receive complaints from voters about machines malfunctioning, and those complaints will only increase unless we start replacing aging voting machines.

We are fortunate here in Ohio that our election officials are exploring what options are available to begin replacement. And we have a ready example from the last state budget for how the state can provide funds to support counties. Last session, the legislature approved matching funds to aid counties in purchasing electronic pollbooks, with DAS and the Secretary of State making available negotiated bulk pricing options from approved vendors.

We agree with last week's testimony of Mr. Ward, President of the Ohio Association of Election Officials, that while we appreciate that the House included some starter funds to help begin addressing this problem, the need is far greater than the amount budgeted. While we recognize this is a lean budget year, we encourage the Senate to explore other avenues to ensure the machinery of democratic elections runs smoothly. Mr. Ward provided one example, of looking at potentially using capital dollars as opposed to GRF dollars to help fund matching funds to help counties replace voting machines. Another option that might be considered comes from one of our sister Leagues. On May 23, the LWV of California, the California Secretary of State, and several state legislators announced a "Voting Modernization Bond Act" which aims to raise funds to update "voting equipment that is perilously near its life expectancy."¹

3. Improve Online Election Services

Last but not least, we urge you to consider appropriating funds to improve online election services. As more and more Americans use online services, we need to improve usability and security for online election services hosted on the SOS website, including improving the user interface for online voter registration, allowing online absentee applications, and modernizing the portal for campaign finance filings and reporting.

LWVO believes that these three important measures will have a lasting positive impact on election administration in Ohio, and we urge you to ensure they are included in HB49.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

¹ See <https://lwvc.org/news/league-joins-secretary-state-assemblymember-gonzalez-fletcher-and-county-elections-officials> and www.sos.ca.gov/administration/news-releases-and-advisories/2017-news-releases-and-advisories/secretary-state-padilla-and-assemblymember-gonzalez-fletcher-announce-voting-modernization-bond-act-2018/