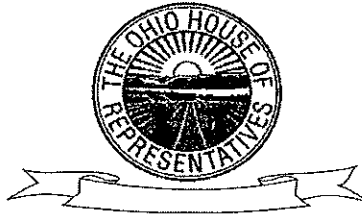


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Representative Alicia Reece
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VOTER BILL OF RIGHTS CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

TESTIMONY

Chairman Richard Saphire, Vice Chairwoman Justice French, and members of the Bill of Rights and Voting Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on voting rights for the purposes of the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission. I come before you today as a Member of the Ohio General Assembly, Representing the 33rd District of the Ohio House, President of the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus, National Board Member of the National Action Network, and a concerned citizen on a crusade to make Voting Rights a permanent part of our state constitution and state constitutions across the country. Today I provide proposed language for a Voter Bill of Rights amendment to be placed in the Ohio constitution. As a result of costly litigation, voter suppression legislation and pending proposals, voter intimidation tactics, thousands of uncounted provisional ballots, and last minute election rule changes, there needs to be a standardized, uniform, Voter Bill of Rights in the constitution.

During my last testimony, I asked this committee to consider a Voter Bill of Rights constitutional amendment. I explained that, while there are some voting protections in Ohio law, these protections can be easily modified or repealed by the General Assembly. By placing these protections in the Ohio Constitution, we ensure that voter protections can only be changed through a ballot initiative passed by the voters themselves. Thus, the Voter's Bill of Rights constitutional amendment will secure permanent voting rights for our citizens and ensure that our right to vote will not be infringed upon at the whim of state officials-- regardless of which party is in charge.

Let me briefly review what our concept of the Voter Bill of Rights will contain.

The Voter Bill of Rights will define the right to vote as a fundamental right, establish early voting dates and times, allow the legislature to prescribe proper training and staffing for polling locations, allow for an up-to-date online voter registration system, protect against restrictive voter ID requirements and voter registration tests, and include safeguards that ensure provisional ballots are counted.

While the final language of the Voter Bill of Rights is still being drafted, I am here today to discuss two very important provisions of it with you.

These two provisions will update our state constitution to include language that establishes and protects Ohioans' fundamental right to vote. The purpose of the Voter Bill of Rights is to place the right to vote on the firmest possible legal foundation, beyond the ability of the General Assembly to change it every election year. In short, the Voter Bill of Rights is intended to put an end to what some have called the "voting wars" in Ohio.

The first section of the Voter Bill of Rights declares that the right to vote is fundamental, deserving of no less protection than the freedoms of speech and religion. It states:

"A universal emblem of freedom worldwide, the right of all citizens to cast a ballot and to have their votes counted in every election—free from government interference, impingement, limitation, or intrusion of any kind—is declared to be fundamental and inviolable in the State of Ohio."

The state constitution must declare that the right of Ohioans to vote and to make their votes count is fundamental. Currently, it does not. I believe this is necessary to ensure that the right to vote is completely free from impingement, limitation, or intrusion—by courts, by the legislature, or by other public officials.

The second half of this first provision addresses who may exercise their right to vote in a particular election.

“A person may exercise this right in a particular election in this State if he or she is a citizen of the United States at least 18 years of age on the date of the election, if he or she is registered to vote in this State on or before the deadline established by law, which shall be no more than 30 days before the date of the election; and if at the time of voting he or she is a resident of the county in which he or she seeks to vote.”

The concept of the Voter Bill of Rights reduces the requirements to vote to only three: at least 18 years old, resident of the state, and registered for at least 30 days. Any citizen who satisfies these three requirements is qualified to vote.

The second provision I bring before this committee today is simple, yet powerful. In my previous testimony I explained that language should be included in the state constitution permitting the General Assembly to pass laws to facilitate and expand upon voter's rights, but not prevent them. We have included this into the Voter Bill of Rights by stating that:

“The General Assembly may pass laws effectuating or expanding the voting rights and opportunities specified herein, but in no event may it pass laws denying, restricting, or limiting such rights and opportunities.”

In other words, this provision further eliminates the legislature's ability to tamper with or thwart a citizen's voting rights.

There should be no more temporary solutions to permanent problems. Voting is a sacred and fundamental right that should never be taken for granted. The Voter Bill of Rights should be included in our state constitution to ensure that every Ohioan is able to easily register to vote and that their vote will be counted.

In closing, I would also like to acknowledge the group of individuals who helped me develop the concept of the Voter Bill of Rights: Paul DeMarco Esq., Don McTigue Esq., the President of the League of Women Voters Nancy Brown, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters Carrie Davis, Democratic Caucus Staffers, Malika Bartlett, Sarah Cherry, Charisse Burgess, and Christian Gillikin, State Director of Ohio Voice Deidra Reese, Election Administration Director

of Ohio Voice Camille Wimbish, and Co- Chair of the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission, State Representative Vernon Sykes.

Chairman Richard Saphire, Vice Chairwoman Justice French, and members of the Bill of Rights and Voting Committee, thank you once again for allowing me the opportunity to testify about voting rights for the purposes of the Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission. I welcome any questions that you may have.

