

A Mid-Summer Heads Up Concerning Critical Political Reform Initiatives Now Being Debated In Ohio, Cincinnati, And Washington -July 20, 2021
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

The following piece offers a mid-summer heads up concerning critical current political reform issues that people concerned about the health of democracy need to be aware of. Voting rights and redistricting deserve public attention in Columbus, and here in Cincinnati, a task force established by City Council to address recent corruption has proposed several reforms aimed at preventing the corrupting influence of political donations. Meanwhile, a diverse coalition of advocacy groups dedicates the summer to promoting the Voting Rights Act in the U.S. Senate.

Beginning locally, the nine member anti-corruption task force appointed by Mayor John Cranley is seeking public commentary concerning its preliminary report and proposed reforms. Established by City Council late last year, the task force is a response to the three Council members who were removed from office due to charges of bribery. Former Councilwoman Tamaya Dennard was convicted in her case, while Jeff Pastor and P. G. Sittenfeld are presently fighting their corruption charges in Court.

Since all three cases relate to campaign donations in exchange for support of proposed development projects, the Task Force put forward two reforms attempting to thwart the corrupting potentials of political payoffs for a Councilmember's backing of a pending project. One proposal would forbid a developer or development company from making a contribution to a member of Council or Council candidate during the time period when their project is under review by City Council. A second proposal would require a City Council member or candidate to disclose any donations to a political action committee that was under his or her control. (Councilman Sittenfeld is alleged to have asked for payments to such a political action committee.)

These two reforms would augment the campaign reform Charter Amendment passed by City voters in 2001. That Amendment put in place contribution limits for Mayoral and Council candidates as well as campaign donation disclosure regulations. The Task Force held a Zoom Forum to hear from the public on July 9th, and citizens should now offer their thoughts to members of City Council, who will have the responsibility for taking the next steps concerning these recommendations.

Meanwhile, advocates of political reform have a lot to keep abreast of in Columbus. First of all, the General Assembly has been dealing with a Bill that focuses on voting and election procedures. According to Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, House Bill 294 will be revisited by the Legislature in September. Although this Bill includes some voter suppression provisions, the proposal is not in the same league with the oppressive legislation in states such as Georgia and Arizona. According to Turcer, 294 also includes real improvements such as the ability to register to vote when renewing one's drivers' license.

The strategy now adopted by reform groups like Common Cause is to work in the upcoming legislative session to remove the voter suppression sections from the Bill, while advocating for the positive sections. Turcer noted that besides providing the ability to register to vote at the license bureau, House Bill 294 also improves the state's current process of removing people

from the voter registration rolls.

Turcer outlined House Bill 294's provisions that need to be scrapped. An additional ID-requirement when applying to vote absentee would make this process more difficult for many Ohioans. Further, the Bill calls for throwing out mail-in ballots that are not properly sealed in the envelopes provided by Boards of Election. Finally, the Bill shortens the time period for dropping off ballots in drop boxes, and it limits the placement of these drop boxes to County Boards of Election. Turcer emphasized the importance of citizen contact with House Reps and State Senators once negotiations begin again on 294 this September.

Turcer also confirmed that House Bill 13, the disclosure proposal supported by Common Cause, is still in committee. If citizens don't call on their Representatives to take up this Bill in the fall session, she warned, then it could quietly expire. This proposal would require the now prevalent independent political action committees established to support candidates and issues to disclose the names of large donors. Common Cause would like to see this proposal amended to better maintain the separation between these PACs and the campaign operations of candidates for public office.

Next, Turcer described the activities now underway to prepare for the redistricting process that will occur in Ohio this fall. Since the last round of redistricting in 2011 that produced highly gerrymandered Congressional and state districts, Ohio voters have passed two State Constitutional Amendments that reform this process. This is the first time that the changes spelled out in these Amendments will be utilized in drawing up the new district maps, and reform groups like Common Cause and the League of Women Voters want as many citizens as possible involved in order to insure an open and fair process. In fact, several coalitions exist to oversee and participate in the upcoming map making for the state's political districts. For instance, the Equal Districts Coalition, represents twenty citizen groups concerned about this issue.

Turcer outlined what groups like Common Cause are presently doing to focus citizen attention on redistricting. It works with other organizations to recruit and administer a speaker's bureau to keep people in communities across the state informed. Since the new procedures allow Ohioans to submit their own maps for review, Common Cause has also hired a person with map making expertise to work with local groups interested in drawing up their versions of fair and compact district lines. Common Cause and its allies, concluded Turcer, are also supplying people with yard signs that call attention to the need for fair districts.

Finally, concerned citizens need to keep up to date on reform legislation taking shape in the U.S. Congress. Common Cause and a host of other organizations concerned about preserving voting rights are spending the summer promoting the For The People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. Due to the many voter suppression laws being enacted in states across the country, this campaign has taken on even greater importance in the battle to preserve democracy in this country.

The recent flight of Democratic Representatives from the Texas Legislature in order to temporarily block the passage of another voter suppression law gave new energy to this reform campaign in Washington, D.C. The Texas Reps flew to the nation's Capital to establish a safe

distance from possible arrest at home and to call attention for the need for an effective national voting rights law. While in D.C., the Texans are lobbying Senators to pass such legislation in order to prevent what is happening in their state and many others. Their presence and a recent speech on this issue by President Biden provide a lot of news media coverage, and it puts added pressure on Senators to take some action. It should also inspire us to write or call our Senators. We may be in the midst of the summer doldrums, but we are also living through a critical time for the health of our democratic institutions.