



Voting Reforms Approved by the House of Representatives

No Reason Absentee Voting

The League of Women Voters of Michigan (LWVMI) has long supported allowing all voters to apply for an absentee ballot without giving a reason, to promote easy and accessible voting. Recently, the issue has gained bi-partisan support in the House and some interest in the Senate.

On April 30, the MI House of Representatives passed HB 4367, which allows any registered voter to request an absentee ballot. The bill enables voters to apply for and deliver the absentee ballot to their clerk in person, by mail, fax or email. Current law requires voters to check one of six reasons when applying for an absentee ballot (see box), which disqualifies most voters.

✓ [Find out if your Representative voted for or against HB 4363.](#)

Universal access to the absentee ballot – no reason absentee voting -- is an important part of improving Michigan’s election system. Demands of everyday life can make it difficult for people to vote in person on Election Day. Workers with schedules that conflict with poll times, parents juggling work and children’s activities, caretakers unable to leave the person in their care – these are just some of the circumstances that prevent people from voting. Long voting lines also pose a problem for people who need to return to work or other responsibilities.

Sponsored by Rep. Woodrow Stanley (D-Flint), the bill passed the House on a 79-30 vote. In a joint response, several opposing legislators stated, “Allowing no-reason absentee voting greatly increases the potential for voter fraud and undermines confidence in our election results...If we want to increase early voting, the proper way to do it is to allow voters to vote at their clerk’s office before the election, in person, where their identity can be verified.”

Twenty-eight states allow no-reason absentee voting, including neighbors Ohio and Wisconsin, and a recent public opinion survey found that 60% of Michigan’s citizens support no excuse absentee voting. Among the supporters are Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land and Michigan’s county and municipal clerk associations.

According to Macomb County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh, “Voting should be as easy as paying taxes: we allow residents to pay taxes by mail without giving a reason. Surely the same convenience could be extended to our residents when voting.”

Who Can Vote Absentee?

Under current law, to obtain an absentee ballot, a registered voter must give one of the following reasons:

- 60 years of age or older
- Physical disability that requires assistance
- Religious reasons
- Appointed to be an election precinct inspector in another precinct
- Expect to be out of town when the polls are open
- Confined to jail awaiting arraignment or trial

Making a false statement in the absentee ballot application is a misdemeanor offense.

HB 4367 awaits action in the Senate Government Operations and Reform Committee.



Voting Reforms Pass in House (continued from page 1)

Voter Registration

Bills that expand options for voter registration and identity verification passed the House in June by substantial majorities. The changes would make registering and voting easier for people who temporarily live, work, or study in communities other than their hometowns.

HB 4383, approved by a 93-16 vote, allows any clerk to verify the identity of a person who registered to vote by mail, regardless of where the person resides. The clerk who verifies the identity notifies the clerk in the place of residence that the identification requirement has been satisfied. HB 4993, approved by a vote of 80-28, allows an individual to register to vote at any clerk's office in the state. Current law requires individuals to register at the county or locality in which they live. Both bills were sent to the Senate Committee on Campaign and Election Oversight on July 15 and await action.

LWVMI Submits Comment to MI Supreme Court on Recusal Standards

The League of Women Voters of Michigan (LWVMI) and seven endorsing organizations submitted comments to the Michigan Supreme Court in July regarding proposed judicial recusal standards. Michigan is the only state in the nation that lacks rules to disqualify a justice from participating in a case due to conflict of interest, bias, or other improprieties. In March, the Court published three different proposals for disqualification standards and accepted public comment until August 1st.

Signing onto the comments were AAUW of MI, Common Cause MI, MI Campaign Finance Network, MI Environmental Council, MI League of Conservation Voters, MI NOW, and MI State Conference NAACP.

The organizations urged the Court to provide for recusal when a case involves a significant financial supporter of a justice's election campaign. Michigan Supreme Court elections have become multi-million dollar campaigns, exemplified by the \$7.5 million spent in 2008. The U.S. Supreme Court recently determined that election spending can be a source of perceived bias in judicial decision-making (*Caperton v. Massey Coal Company*) but left it to states to set standards for justices to step aside.

LWVMI is especially concerned that the influence of money in judicial elections is eroding public trust and confidence in the Court, threatening one of the foundations of our democracy. A recent public opinion survey by the Michigan Campaign Finance Network found that Michigan voters doubt that a judge can remain impartial in cases that involve a significant contributor (see box).

Campaign Money Threatens Public Confidence in the Court

A recent survey of Michigan voters found:

- 93% believe it is important for judges to be independent of the influence of campaign supporters.
- 67% doubt a judge's ability to be fair and impartial when one of the parties spent \$50,000 to support the judge's election.
- 77% doubt a judge's ability to be fair and impartial when one of the parties spent \$1,000,000 to support the judge's election.
- 85% believe that a judge should ask another judge to hear a case in which a party has spent \$50,000 to support the first judge's election.

Source: MI Campaign Finance Network



MICHIGAN VOTER POWER CAMPAIGN

Taking action to make voting easier and elections more transparent

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LWVMI Submits Comment on Recusal Standards (continued from page 2)

LWVMI and endorsing organizations recommended that the Court's recusal standards address all forms of campaign spending, including funds given to third parties for television advertisements and similar election communications. More than half of the 2008 expenditures were used for television ads sponsored by special interest groups, rather than contributed directly to a judge's campaign.

The Court will hold a public hearing on the proposed standards on September 2nd.

21st Century Voter Conference Videos Available

LWVMI's April 24th conference on election-related issues was recorded in full by Detroit Public Television and DVDs are now available. The conference featured a speech by Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly and a panel discussion on Michigan Supreme Court elections; a panel of current and former legislators and academic experts on the impacts of term limits; a speech on innovations in state elections laws and a panel discussion on ways to make voting more convenient and accessible. Contact faircourts@lwvmi.org for copies.

LWVMI is looking for people who wanted to vote in the last election but couldn't make it to the polls. If you know someone who would be willing to share his or her story, please contact faircourts@lwvmi.org.

MICHIGAN VOTER POWER CAMPAIGN

League of Women Voters of Michigan

200 Museum Drive, Suite 104

Lansing, MI 48933

517-484-5383

faircourts@lwvmi.org

www.lwvmi.org