



THE LEAGUE
OF WOMEN VOTERS

M I C H I G A N

EDUCATING AND ADVOCATING FOR RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

LWVMI President's Remarks to Detroit Rotary on "Strengthening Our Democracy", October 5, 2011

Good Afternoon

I appreciate having the opportunity to speak with you today about "Strengthening Our Democracy".

What can we, as people who care about our country, do, to ensure its future? I would like to address two areas where we could take some action, here in Michigan.

One would be to make some reforms in our election laws. The other would be to reduce the role that money plays in the election of our State Supreme Court Justices. First, let's look at some possible election law reforms.

I think we can agree that a strong democracy depends upon the active participation of an informed electorate. These days one can hardly escape hearing about elections. Whether it's a local election coming up this fall or the state and federal elections we'll be facing in 2012, the media is full of election news, polls and predictions.

The League of Women Voters is non-partisan. We do not support or oppose candidates or political parties. We do try to educate voters about the candidates and issues. I think the League is probably best known for its work in conducting Candidate Forums and in producing non-partisan Voter Guides.

But, the League is also a citizen advocate. For example, we advocate for removing barriers to voting so that more citizens can participate in elections.

There are two changes we could make in Michigan that would make voting more convenient: "no reason" absentee voting and early voting.

In Michigan the law allows people to vote absentee only if

- a. They are 60 years of age
- b. They have a disability
- c. They will be absent from the city or township on election day during voting hours

There are no provisions, other than lying, for people whose work schedule does not allow them to get to the polls on Election Day.

Times have changed. People are busier. We need election laws that keep up with the needs of today's voters. Whether it's because of working longer, supporting our kids' activities or other personal commitments; we're all busier than ever. 28 other states, including Ohio, Wisconsin and Iowa, permit "no reason" absentee voting. The current Secretary of State, Ruth Johnson, has stated that she is in favor of "no reason absentee" voting as long as there are safeguards in place to prevent fraud

Another thing we could do to make voting more convenient would be to permit early voting.

There are a number of ways that early voting could occur. One way would be to allow citizens to vote on regular voting machines at their clerk's office. Completed ballots would be run through the ballot counting machine so that voters would know if they had made an error such as voting for too many candidates or choosing candidates from both parties which is not allowed in the primary election.

32 other states offer early voting; why not Michigan? Other states that have passed these reforms, “no reason” absentee voting and early voting have been successful and are not experiencing fraud or any other problems. Michigan voters, regardless of age, partisanship, gender or income, are overwhelmingly supportive of early and no reason absentee voting. In a recent survey, 7 out of 10 respondents supported these reforms. This is a non-partisan issue: 84% of Democrats and 60% of Republicans are also supportive.

Local clerks are confident that these reforms will not lead to election fraud. Michigan has strong laws and election procedures for protecting against voter fraud. These reforms are supported by local clerks and clerk associations. Adopting these reforms would make it more convenient for people to vote and would allow people more time to vote, so that they could make informed decisions.

These election law reforms would enable us to strengthen our democracy by encouraging the active participation of an informed electorate.

The second requirement of a strong democracy is a fair and impartial court system.

The role of a judge is to be fair and impartial, to apply the law equally without bias towards one party or another. We depend on the court system to protect our freedoms and provide equal justice for all Americans, not just the wealthy or connected. Judges must be accountable to the Constitution and uphold principles of fairness and equality.

Michigan citizens want transparency and a court system that is free from the influence of the rich and powerful. With the cost of campaigns dramatically increasing in the past decade, Michigan voters and judges have growing concerns about the role money and special interests play in judicial campaigns and court decisions.

Close to 80 percent of Michiganders believe that it is “very important” that judges be independent from the influence of contributors to their campaigns. Eighty percent also believe that all sources of spending for judicial elections should be publicly disclosed. Only through transparency will the public have confidence that the court system treats everyone equally.

To make our government more transparent, honest and accountable, we need laws that reduce the role money plays in politics. Our justice system is weakened if the public believes judges can be bought or influenced to make a certain decision. The public can evaluate the impact of special interest groups only if campaign expenditures are disclosed. We must require full disclosure of all political donations and advertisements.

In 2008, a record \$7.5 million was spent on one Supreme Court seat, and although over half of the money in that campaign paid for TV ads, the source of those contributions was never disclosed to the public. When judges benefit from contributions and financial favors that are not disclosed to the public, the integrity of our court system is weakened. Without full disclosure of the financial supporters of advertisements, the public has no way of knowing who is behind the ad and why they have an interest in supporting the candidate. If we want impartial justice, we cannot drive candidates into the arms of interest groups for campaign contributions. We must provide public funding as an alternative to soliciting contributions. Our current election system requires candidates have personal wealth or access to networks of wealthy donors in order to run a winning campaign. Public funding would remove the possibility, or appearance of judges being beholden to large donors, avoiding conflicts of interest.

These, then, are the things we can do to strengthen our democracy.

1. Increase the active participation of an informed electorate by enacting election law reforms that permit early and “no reason” absentee voting and
2. Reduce the role of money in the selection of our State Supreme Court Justices by requiring full disclosure of who pays for campaign contributions and advertisements, and by providing public funding as an alternative to soliciting contributions.

This is what the League of Women Voters is working on. We invite you to join us in this effort.