

LWV Ohio Statehouse Day – March 31, 2015

LWVO Lobbyist Report

Judiciary

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The League has joined with the Ohio Supreme Court, the Ohio State Bar Association and the Bliss Institute of the University of Akron in an effort to develop a statewide judicial voter guide that will provide information about all judicial candidates in the State. In addition, the Guide, which will be housed on a website at the University of Akron, will provide information about the courts. It is hard to vote intelligently for a judge for a particular court, such as probate or appellate court, without a basic understanding of what these courts do.

In conjunction with this effort, the Bliss Institute conducted a poll of Ohio voters. The poll found that three-fifths of registered voters said the major reason that they didn't vote for judges was because of a lack of information about the candidates. A site where this information is readily available should be welcomed, although there will be a challenge to publicize it and make it user friendly. The poll also indicated considerable interest by many Ohioans in considering other ways of selecting judges, suggesting that Ohioans may not be as wedded to judicial elections as some have assumed.

The League has long sought to change the way Ohioans select their judges and the polling results coupled with the growing problem of money in elections has encouraged us to renew our efforts. The ramification of money in politics extends far beyond the judiciary, but it is particularly pernicious when it relates to judges because it undermines their independence in appearance if not in fact.

In February we convened a meeting to begin exploring possible reform with interested parties, including the Chief Justice and other representatives of the Supreme Court, the Ohio State Bar Association, the Bliss Institute and various national groups active in judicial reform, including Justice at Stake, the Piper Fund and the Brennan Center.

The upshot of the meeting is that we intend to meet with various stakeholders around the state who might be interested in some aspect of judicial reform, be it appointment retention elections or some of the other alternatives which might improve the current situation, such as a commission to screen judicial candidates, enhanced disclosure coupled with stricter recusal rules, or public financing. Reform will not be accomplished overnight, but we are hopeful that a long term strategic effort can produce results.