



Ohio

Holding Power Accountable

Testimony on House Bill 1 of the Special Session
Before the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee
By Catherine Turcer, Common Cause Ohio
May 29, 2024

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and for creating a space for the public to weigh in on legislation proposed during this Special Session. My name is Catherine Turcer. I am the executive director of Common Cause Ohio, an organization devoted to open and accountable government. For many years, I have advocated for greater transparency in Ohio's campaign finance system. I am here testifying as an interested party.

Money plays an outsized role in elections. I strongly encourage you and other members of the state legislature to create a much more transparent system so that voters can "follow the money" so that they can consider the source of information and so that wealthy special interests don't drown out the voices of Ohio voters.

Foreign money is prohibited under an opinion by the Ohio Elections Commission that determined that *"Ohio's statutory structure sufficiently prohibits the involvement of any foreign national from participating in or contributing to an issue or question that will appear on an Ohio ballot."*

There is a clear benefit to overtly banning foreign money in elections in law. However, I have some reservations about rushing such important public policy discussions through a special session.

Good enforcement is an important part of a campaign finance system that works. This bill, introduced just yesterday, takes the enforcement power away from county prosecutors and gives it instead to the Ohio Attorney General. Remember, the Attorney General already has a role in ballot campaigns: This elected official reviews the summary language of citizen initiated ballot measures. Giving him a second role does not create the proper checks and balances that are needed.

I would like to believe that no Attorney General would abuse their role in the process, but it could be tempting. We need to ensure that investigations don't become politicized.

While the sponsor of this legislation is correct that the Ohio Elections Commission is a "paper tiger," it is a panel that includes Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. A better approach to ensuring that Ohio elections are free of foreign influence would be to strengthen the Commission by providing broader investigative powers and a larger budget.

A comprehensive and effective campaign finance law would include provisions that create greater transparency. To ensure that foreign money doesn't play a role in Ohio elections, it is necessary to require good disclosure from those engaging in independent expenditures. Nothing in this legislation addresses how the lack of transparency fostered the House Bill 6 scandal. Dark money has impacted Ohio elections for years and Ohioans have been living with the consequences. Improved disclosure of these activities is strikingly missing from HB 1. Creating greater transparency will make it easier to root out foreign money and other shenanigans.

It takes time to create good campaign finance law. I urge you to slow down to ensure that there aren't unintended consequences. Thank you.