Common Cause

Rhode Island

Holding Power Accountable

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Testimony on behalf of Common Cause Rhode Island in Support of H 7476--An Act Relating to Elections--Statewide Referenda Elections

<u>Position: Support</u>

Common Cause Rhode Island supports H 7476 that would require that the descriptions of statewide ballot questions be written in plain language. According to the Center for Civic Design, almost 50% of all voters qualify as low literacy because of cognitive or vision issues, English as a second language, low educational level, because they are rushed readers, or they are encountering situational stress.[1]

The use of plain language is important in elections. "Adults with low literacy skills can struggle with both word recognition and understanding what the words put together actually mean. These reading difficulties can affect voter education, and unavoidably affect the process of marking a ballot and casting the vote."[2] Academic research has shown that the use of plain language improves the voting experience for low literacy voters.[3]

The use of plain language is a best practice for many areas of election administration. An example is in the Election Assistance Commission's Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines 2.0 (VVSG 2.0) are the federal standards for election equipment. VVSG 2.0 requires not only that all messages to voters be displayed in plain language but all the instructions for poll workers as well.

Multiple communities in Rhode Island are required by federal law to provide ballots in English and Spanish. Research by the Center for Civic Design has shown that, "[t]he quality of the English version of a ballot can have a direct impact on the quality of the translation. When the original is complex or uses obscure terminology, translations will be equally hard to read."[4] Using plain language helps voters in all languages.

Common Cause Rhode Island supports H 7476 and efforts to expand the use of plain language in our elections.

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[1] See: https://civicdesign.org/plain-language/
[2] See: https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/evtwote14/jets_0202-summers.pdf
[3] See:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279447226_The_Impact_of_Literacy_on_Usable_and_Accessible_Electronic_Voting
[4] See: https://civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Language-Access-V10-17-0710b.pdf