

Ohio voters reject referendum measure backed by anti-abortion forces

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By a margin of 57 to 43 percent, Ohio voters voted resoundingly on August 8 to defeat a measure that would have made it much harder to amend the state constitution. The referendum was placed on the ballot by the Republican-controlled state legislature in order to obstruct passage of a state constitutional amendment to protect abortion access in the state, which is on the ballot in November.

The turnout of more than 3 million was remarkable for an August election in which only one issue was on the ballot, and no candidates for office. This was nearly double the turnout for last year's primary elections, which included contested races for governor, US Senate, and the House of Representatives.

The obvious conclusion is that Ohio voters care far more about defending democratic rights, including the right of women to access abortion services, than they do about choosing among the capitalist politicians who are vying for the nominations of the Democratic and Republican parties.

The state legislature, under Republican control for more than a dozen years because of one of the most blatant gerrymanders of any state, sought to raise the requirement for passage of a constitutional amendment to 60 percent of those voting. For more than a century, Ohio voters have been able to amend the constitution by collecting hundreds of thousands of signatures on a petition, and then winning a majority vote, 50 percent plus one, in an election.

Abortion rights groups collected half a million signatures to place the referendum on the November ballot, and opinion polls suggest that the amendment will pass with 58 to 59 percent of the vote. The measure placed on the August ballot was thus calculated to turn that impending victory for abortion rights into a defeat.

The Ohio legislature recently passed a so-called "Heartbeat bill," which includes some of the most

restrictive anti-abortion laws in the country, banning the procedure as early as six weeks into term—before a woman is likely even to know she's pregnant. The proposed amendment would protect women and their doctors and limit future regulations until after a fetus is viable.

The August special election over a procedural initiative was unprecedented and potentially illegal, as the same legislature passed a law this past December prohibiting special elections in August, owing to their paltry turnouts and high costs.

The effort was utterly cynical, since the anti-abortion groups aimed to mobilize a bare majority of voters to bar any future bare majority from ever working its will.

The measure was widely condemned by voters, Democratic politicians, and even well-known Republicans, like former Ohio governors John Kasich and Bob Taft, who derided the anti-democratic referendum as a desperate and underhanded attempt to undermine popular will on the upcoming abortion vote.

In addition to raising the threshold for approving constitutional amendments from a simple majority to 60 percent, Issue 1 would have eliminated a 10-day "cure period" in which voters could correct problematic signatures, and require collecting signatures in all 88 Ohio counties, up from the current 44.

As it transpired, there was a substantial "no" vote even in the rural counties, and Issue 1 was heavily defeated in the seven largest counties, nine of the 10 largest, and in all the major cities in the state: Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo, Akron, Dayton, Youngstown, and Canton.

The fascist right also made the connection between the August procedural vote and the November abortion initiative. Former vice president and 2024 presidential hopeful Mike Pence distributed a video on social media in which he stated, "Democrats want to keep the threshold as low as possible, so they can pass abortion on demand,

so they can advance their extreme gender ideology agenda... Don't let that happen, Ohio."

By keeping "the threshold as low as possible," Pence is deriding the basic democratic principle of majority rule. In over a century that Ohioans have had the right to amend their constitution by ballot initiative, two-thirds of the amendments approved would have failed to meet the 60 percent threshold.

In an era of recurrent economic crises, escalating war on multiple fronts, and mounting social tensions at home, capitalist politicians must dispense with democratic pretensions.

The Ohio lawmakers' political maneuverings are just the latest in a decades-long assault on democratic norms. Ohio is one of the principal "swing states" in federal elections, but in the state legislature, Republicans control 67 of 99 State House seats and 26 of 33 State Senate seats, due to rampant gerrymandering.

For the last decade, they also controlled 12 of 16 seats in the federal House of Representatives, or 75 percent, despite winning less than 60 percent of the vote for House candidates. This shifted slightly, to 10 out of 15, in the 2022 election, when Ohio lost one seat due to reapportionment.

Ohioians twice amended their state constitution in 2015 and 2018 to end the corrupt practice of gerrymandering. Undeterred, the Republican-controlled Redistricting Commission produced biased map after biased map. Five times the Ohio Supreme Court rejected these maps, but the Redistricting Commission ran out the clock and a federal judge ruled that one of these maps should be used in upcoming elections.

American workers will find no support for their democratic rights from the Democrats, either. They seek to use the issue of abortion rights for the sole purpose of accumulating votes for right-wing Democratic Party candidates who can offer nothing else to working people, and use the issue of abortion rights to disguise their support for austerity, wage-cutting and imperialist war.

For 50 years the Democrats raised billions in campaign contributions on the pretense they would defend abortion rights, which Pew Research finds Americans overwhelmingly support by 61 to 37 percent—a similar margin to when Pew started surveying on this topic nearly 30 years ago.

However, when Obama was elected, promising "hope" and "change" after the reviled Bush administration and the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress with a filibuster-proof supermajority, they spent their "political

capital" bailing out the banks, prosecuting wars across the world, and "solving" the healthcare crisis by forcing millions to buy private health insurance. They did nothing to safeguard abortion rights from the right-wing majority in the Supreme Court.

Today, the Democrats need bipartisan support for their unpopular agenda of making the working class pay for their war drives against Russia and China and further bank bailouts for the rich.

Even so-called "democratic socialists" in Congress sit idle as the Federal Reserve hikes interest rates, causing a jobs bloodbath to suppress wages, and voted last year to ban strikes on the railroads after workers rejected a rotten deal negotiated by the Biden administration.

But workers are turning out in droves to defend their own social interests. Ohio is already the seventh state since the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022 either to pass legislative or constitutional measures to protect abortion rights, or to defeat measures that would have tightened restrictions. These include Republican-dominated states like Kansas, Kentucky and Montana, heavily Democratic states like California and Vermont, and contested states like Michigan and now Ohio.

Contrary to the media narratives, American workers are turning to the left, not the right. However, to defend and expand social rights, protect jobs and wages, oppose the drive to World War III, reverse the climate catastrophe, and fight for all other basic requirements of life, workers need to break with both capitalist parties and build an independent political movement based on a revolutionary socialist program.



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