

AAUW MICHIGAN PARTNERS WITH THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

The 21st Century Voter: Promoting Michigan Voter Power

On April 24, 2009, the LWV sponsored a conference about making it easier to vote and reducing the influence of money in elections. Sally Doty and Carol Pyke, AAUW of Michigan state board officers, attended as representatives of AAUW of Michigan which was a sponsoring supporter.

Jocelyn Benson, Assistant Professor of Law at Wayne State University Law School, spoke about the role that a state's chief election administrator plays in the electoral process. She cited examples of decisions made by Secretaries of State across the nation that have opened elections to more convenience for the voters. Examples included same day voter registration, no-fault absentee voting, and quick verification of voter eligibility.

A panel of municipal and county election officials presented their perspectives on the pros and cons of various reforms to make it easier to vote. 28 states presently allow no-excuse absentee voting and 31 provide for some form of early voting. What other changes in election law could make voting easier to improve voter participation?

Dr. Marjorie Sarbaugh-Thompson, Ph.D. and Associate Professor of Political Science at Wayne State University discussed the research she has completed in the ten-year study of the effects of term limits. A full disclosure of the research is available in the book she authored entitled, The Political and Institutional Effects of Term Limits. She was joined by a number of term-limited legislators and Dr. Richard Cole of Michigan State University who re-enforced the fact that term limits have not led to the types of changes proponents had expected. Constitutional change and proposals for changing term limits were discussed.

A high point of the program included remarks from Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, Marilyn Kelly, addressing the effects of money and politics in campaigns for the Michigan Supreme Court and how to safeguard public confidence in the Court's impartiality. The statistics she presented were shocking.

The final panel was a debate between Mark Brewer, Chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, and Robert LaBrant, Senior Vice President & General Counsel for the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. Rich Robinson, Executive Director, MI Campaign Finance Network, moderated the discussion revealing the lack of financial accountability in Michigan Supreme Court election campaigns. The 2008 Michigan Supreme Court election campaign was the most expensive yet for a single seat on the court, and one of the most rancorous in memory. The pattern raises questions of recusal and due process that can undermine faith in the impartiality of Court decisions. Should Supreme Court justices be appointed instead of elected? How can campaigns be conducted that don't impede First Amendment rights and don't undermine trust and confidence in the impartiality of the Michigan Supreme Court?

This was a full day of thoughtful presentations that will require careful analysis and specific action plans to create election processes that are more convenient and impartial for the voter and reduce the influence of money, particularly in Michigan Supreme Court elections.

The full conference was recorded for webcasting on MiVote.org.

Submitted by Sally Doty and Carol Pyke