

Citizen Engagement Corner

CITIZEN-INITIATED BALLOT QUESTIONS

League of Women Voters of Brookline

People are confused. Who do we believe when we see diametrically opposed viewpoints on TV about Ballot Question #1 on Patient-to-Nurse Limits? Is the debate about patient safety, vis-à-vis the ratio of nurses to patients in hospitals, or is it more complex – *e.g.*, flexibility of ratios depending on circumstances, widely divergent estimates of additional costs if “Yes.” Who’s paying for these ads? What’s their vested interest?

We may have strong feelings, but most of us probably do not think about what lies behind the evolution of a ballot question, i.e. the initiative and referendum process.

Meanwhile, voters need to decide by the Nov. 6th election, whether to mark their ballot Yes or No on the following three questions. Information is culled from the Secretary of State’s Information for Voters and the League of Women Voters of MA (LWVMA) website.

Ballot Question #1: *Patient-to-Nurse Limits*. The LWVMA takes no position on Question 1.

A *Yes* vote would limit the number of patients that could be assigned to one registered nurse in hospitals and certain other health care facilities. The maximum number of patients per registered nurse would vary by type of unit and level of care, spelled out in detail in the question. The proposed law would require a covered facility to comply with the patient assignment limits without reducing its level of nursing, service, maintenance, clerical, professional, and other staff.

A *No* vote would make no change in current laws relative to patient-to-nurse limits.

Ballot Question #2: *Commission on Limiting Election Spending and Corporate Rights*. The LWVMA supports a Yes vote on Question 2.

A *Yes* vote would create a citizens commission to consider amendments to the US Constitution to limit the influence of money in elections and establish that corporations do not have the same rights as human beings (established by Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision on campaign finance). Any resident of Massachusetts who is a United States citizen would be able to apply for appointment to the 15-member commission, and members would serve without compensation. The commission's first report would be due December 31, 2019.

A *No* vote would not create this commission.

Ballot Question #3: *Transgender Anti-Discrimination*. The LWVMA supports a *Yes* vote on Question 3.

A *Yes* vote would keep in place the 2016 law, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity in places of public accommodation.

A *No* vote would repeal this provision of the public accommodation law.

The LWVMA Study on the Massachusetts Ballot Question Process

In 2018-2019, the LWVMA - and local Leagues, including Brookline - will review state laws and regulations covering the ballot question process, including: 1) ways to improve peoples' understanding of the ballot questions, 2) signature requirements, 3) disclosure by signature collectors if volunteers or paid collectors, 4) parameters for the Legislature's responsibilities in the process; 5) possible limits on campaign financing for ballot questions; and 6) whether the current initiative and referendum process by which citizens can initiate laws, constitutional amendments and repeal laws through referendum should be retained.

More information on ballot questions:

https://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/ele18/ballot_questions_18/ballot_questions18.htm
<https://lwmma.org/lwmma-stands-on-ballot-questions/>

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.