

THE PLAIN DEALER

Election-reform measures debated at CSU forum

Wednesday, October 12, 2005

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Reform Ohio Now has accomplished one goal already: making Buckeye leaders go public about election reform.

The catch is, they still don't agree about it.

Ten activists and officials squared off Tuesday at Cleveland State University over three of RON's four proposals: to expand absentee balloting, curb campaign contributions and form a bipartisan elections commission.

On Nov. 1, other CSU panelists will tackle the fourth measure, which calls for bipartisan redistricting. The four measures, all constitutional amendments, will appear on the Nov. 8 ballot.

CSU's forums are the closest events so far to public debates over the reforms. Supporters want an official debate, but opponents want them to produce a possible redistricting map first. Most of Tuesday's speakers found room for improvement in Ohio's elections. But is the room the size of a closet or an auditorium?

Samuel Gresham of Ohio Common Cause called our current system "chaos," "an abomination" and "a laughingstock." His fellow reformers cited several problems in last year's elections, such as hours-long lines, late rule changes and conflicts of interest at the top. Ohio's secretary of state supervises elections, but present and past secretaries have doubled as leading partisan promoters.

State Sen. Tim Grendell, a Chester Township Republican, called the election "a testament to the good work of the people of Ohio." He said that challenges to the state's procedures failed in court. He also argued that elections are quietly being reformed through laws, which are easier to change than amendments.

Sen. Marc Dann, a Youngstown-area Democrat, supported the proposed contribution reforms as mirroring federal rules and fighting a pay-to-play culture, recently reflected in a disastrous \$50 million investment in a Republican donor's rare-coin fund. But Keith Lake of the Ohio Chamber of Commerce complained that proposed curbs on corporate gifts would hurt groups like his, which represent corporations, more than groups like labor unions, which represent individuals.

Tuesday's forum was sponsored by CSU's new Center for Elections Integrity, which has received federal funds to help develop "transparent, legal, efficient and accurate elections."

Many top reform supporters are Democrats and opponents Republicans. In Columbus Tuesday, foes announced a statewide campaign committee to be co-chaired by Youngstown Mayor George McKelvey, officially a Democrat but often aligned with Republicans.

Go to www.csuohio.edu/cei.

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