

Testimony HB 1173
Senate Government and Veteran Affairs Committee
March 4, 2021

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Government and Veterans Committee, my name is Don Morrison. I live in Bismarck and am providing testimony as a volunteer for North Dakota Voters First. We are a non-partisan group of North Dakotans working to strengthen our democracy, help make our elections and public policy more open, ethical, and accountable to the people of our state.

We are neutral on this bill. On the positive side, we understand, and very much support, the sponsors' stated goal of transparency in our elections. We agree with the sponsors that sunshine on what is happening is a good thing.

However, we are not sure that making ballots many pages longer with fine print in legalese language will actually be an effective way for voters to become better informed about the ins, outs, and ramifications of a ballot measure. Are the sponsors thinking that voters will spend the time in the voting booth reading and understanding ballot measures? If you decide to approve this bill, you may want to consider the ramifications of HB 1253 that would limit voters time to 30 minutes to complete their ballots. That bill was passed by the House.

Sponsors of HB 1173 have talked about how this bill is a way to counter the influence of out-of-state interests. Because that is a motivation behind the bill, we ask that maybe we should deal with that directly. At this time, our state law does not require reporting independent expenditures – or “dark money” – to support or oppose ballot measures and campaigns. So, we don't know who is using the dark money route for support or opposition in our elections. Reporting of those independent expenditures was in HB 1451, a bill that, unfortunately, the House defeated. We think that the cloak of secrecy on that kind of funding should be removed and suggest that the Senate find a way to resurrect the concepts of HB 1451.

In brief, there may be better ways to accomplish this bill's stated intentions.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you about the issues surrounding HB 1173.