

Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson
House Elections Committee Hearing – HB 4129 and HB 4130
September 12, 2023

Good morning, Chair Tsernoglou and members of the House Elections Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of HB 4129 and HB 4130 – bills to protect the people who administer and stand guard over Michigan’s elections.

And thank you to Rep. Kara Hope and the sponsors of this legislation that’s essential to safeguarding our democracy.

The last three statewide elections have brought substantial challenges and opportunities to our state’s system.

In 2018, Michigan’s voters approved a ballot proposal giving every voter the opportunity to cast an absentee ballot for any reason and establishing same-day voter registration.

In 2020, our state was the target of false information about the security and accuracy of our elections. Those unhappy with the results of the presidential election perpetuated an unprecedented and coordinated campaign to erode the public’s confidence in what was one of the most secure, accessible, and transparent elections in our state’s history.

And last November, Michigan citizens turned out in record numbers, voting in a bipartisan manner, to expand every citizen’s voting rights under the state constitution.

Every voter now has the right to vote on Election Day, or to return their absentee ballot to a secure drop box, by mail with prepaid postage, or use an early voting site for at least nine days before Election Day.

For the last five years, Michigan’s clerks have been on the frontlines of these changes. They stand as the guardians of our democracy, always ensuring that every voter can make their voice heard.

For many clerks, this is more than a job – this is their calling.

Election officials are professional. They are nonpartisan. They are deeply committed to the responsibility to carry out free and fair elections.

But in 2020 and in the years since, these guardians of democracy have been threatened and harassed simply for doing their jobs. It is unsustainable and unacceptable.

As I have shared many times, I have also experienced these threats firsthand. Most notoriously in December 2020, when dozens of people angry about the results of the presidential election descended on my home as my son and I watched a Christmas movie.

Growing in numbers over the course of an hour they shouted obscenities and graphic threats into bullhorns, waking my neighbors and shouting for me to come outside in the dark of night.

This was not the first time or the last time someone had come to my home, threatened me, or threatened my staff.

Michigan's clerks and local election officials have also been threatened. They are Republicans, Democrats, and nonpartisan clerks, many working in small towns or rural counties.

They are regular people – our neighbors and community members.

These are civil servants who drive themselves to public meetings, who go back and forth to their offices and homes. They often drop off and pick up children from school or stop for groceries along the way.

And as they go about these daily activities that most take for granted, they are being violently threatened.

Last October, the [FBI reported that Michigan was one of seven states](#) experiencing unusually high numbers of threats to election workers.

- Michigan, along with Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Wisconsin, are all states where the 2020 presidential election results were the subject of a multifaceted, coordinated misinformation campaign.
- That misinformation has had real-world consequences in the form of harassment, doxing of personal information, even death threats against local election officials in these states.

An [April 2023 national survey by the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice](#) reported that nearly three quarters (73%) of local election officials feel that threats have increased in recent years.

- One in three say they have experienced threats, harassment, or abuse. More than half were threatened in person.
- 47% of those surveyed said that state government needs to do more to support them in their jobs.

So, today is the perfect time for this Legislature to take a stand and assure our clerks that we've got their backs.

We cannot allow anyone to attempt to interfere with an election by threatening or intimidating our election officials.

These bills before the committee today will ensure accountability for anyone who harasses an election clerk to the point where that clerk fears for their personal safety.

And these bills send a message to anyone who would attack or threaten the guardians of our democracy here in Michigan – this stops now.

Since 2019, I have had the great pleasure of working side by side with clerks across the state. Regardless of their political party or personal beliefs, they are committed to defend and protect every Michigan voter, their voice, and their vote.

That commitment has never wavered, and it will not waver now.

I am urging you to share that commitment. Stand with our local election officials and pass these needed protections now.