

Date: February 14, 2023

Bill number: SB 210

Neutral (Written)

Caleb Smith, Civic Engagement Campaign Director, Kansas Appleseed

Chairman Thompson and Members of the Committee,

My name is Caleb Smith; I am a Campaign Director for Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive, and just communities.

**Kansas Appleseed is neutral regarding SB 210.** This bill carries a potential for positive and negative outcomes regarding civic engagement, and we hope that you carefully consider the full ramifications of this bill.

SB 210 would potentially create partisan elections at the local level by allowing candidates to designate their political affiliations on the ballot. This carries the concerning potential to inject partisan politics into local government. Allowing for partisan politics to appear on local ballots for school board, city commission, and other service related offices will likely and unnecessarily create partisan gridlock regarding decidedly nonpartisan issues such as local potholes and afterschool programs. This would not be the best environment for creating local policy that is responsive to the needs of Kansas communities.

Local elections are also typically very low information contests. Kansas Appleseed tries to address this informational shortcoming in mostly rural areas by encouraging local candidates to attend public forums, answer questionnaires, and generally engage in the democratic process as a service to voters. Allowing a partisan affiliation on the ballot will similarly provide more information, but also carries the potential to disincentivize active constituent engagement. Allowing a partisan affiliation to appear conspicuously on the ballot will create a tempting conclusion for candidates to reason that voters will take this as shorthand as to how they should vote, negating the need for further engagement by both candidates and voters.<sup>1</sup>

Also concerning about SB 210 is the potential for a return to “political machines” where highly trained professionals such as city managers and clerks will no longer be hired based solely on qualifications, but rather on the basis of partisan loyalty.<sup>2</sup> This potential for increased corruption would decrease interest in civic engagement across the board as voters would quickly conclude that their vote would not matter in such an environment.

There are some potential positives in this bill as well, however. One such positive is the demonstrated correlation between increased voter turnout and the allowance of partisan

---

<sup>1</sup> Davidson, Chandler; and Fraga, Luis Ricardo. (1998). “Slating Groups as Parties in a Nonpartisan Setting” *The Western Political Quarterly*. 41(2):373-390.

<sup>2</sup> <https://klcjourn.com/local-nonpartisan-elections-2021/>

information on the local level.<sup>3</sup> Increased voter participation improves health outcomes across the board, which is why many public health minded organizations such as Kansas Appleseed work to increase voter turnout year after year.<sup>4</sup> Finally, voters are less prone to reelect incumbents year after year, as is the tendency with nonpartisan elections.<sup>5</sup> This is likely at least partly due to the increased turnout and the greater interest in elections when there is more information.

SB 210 is a mixed bag of policy carrying potential for both good and bad results. As such, Kansas Appleseed urges you to carefully weigh all sides of this bill when making your decision.

---

<sup>3</sup> Schaffner, B. F., Streb, M., & Wright, G. (2001). Teams without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections. *Political Research Quarterly*, 54(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/449205>

<sup>4</sup> Yagoda, N. "Addressing Health Disparities Through Voter Engagement." *Annals of Family Medicine*. 2019. <https://www.annfammed.org/content/17/5/459.long>

<sup>5</sup> Id.