



Date: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023  
To: House Committee on Rules  
From: Crystalyn Black, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Neutral for Independent Public Service Compensation Commission, SJR 34 A

Chair Fahey, Vice-Chair Breese-Iverson, Vice-Chair Kropf, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jennifer Parrish Taylor, and I am the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy with the Urban League of Portland and I respectfully submit this testimony related to SJR 34 A. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

By moving forward with SJR 34, the Legislature is delaying the urgent action needed for our communities to be better represented and heard in Salem. After three legislative sessions advocating for this policy, this is not a satisfying outcome. Our coalition advocated for a legislative pathway, with SB 786, because ballot measure campaigns are expensive and time-consuming — resources that the communities who are most impacted by this inequitable system simply don't have. For the Urban League of Portland this is an equity issue, as legislative pay functions as a historic barrier for candidates who are young, have lived experiences, do not have access to wealth, and are members of the BIPOC community. The inequities these candidates face translate into inequities in democratic access for voters. Communities of color and low-income people all across the U.S. continue to be disenfranchised from voting and running for office stemming from a long history of racism and socioeconomic injustice. Although we acknowledge the intent of SJR 34 A to address the historical barriers of pay inequity, we are concerned that it would be costly, and it would delay this critical issue from being addressed.

Opportunities to meaningfully engage as legislators can be restrictive for people with a lower income, significant financial barriers, or those who do not have job flexibility to work while participating in the legislative process. The current salary for legislators is approximately \$34,000, which is not much above the federal poverty level of \$27,750 for a family of four in 2022. Legislators either need independent wealth, retirement income, family money or a second job to make ends meet. And though it is argued that our legislature has greatly diversified in the last several elections, this achievement is constantly at risk due to the lack of sustainable pay. It is no coincidence that historically, Oregon's legislators have been older, whiter and wealthier than the average Oregonian as the low legislative salary is a barrier to electing legislators who represent the diversity of our state.

The legislature must urgently act to create a pathway forward for equal representation. Yet SJR 34 A echoes previously tried and failed strategies. Education campaigns are



often essential for increasing awareness about a ballot and for people to engage in the process. However, ballot measure campaigns are expensive. When looking at Cost Per Required Signature for ballot measure campaigns, it costs approximately \$700,000 on average in Oregon.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the communities who are most impacted by this inequitable system who do not have the resources needed to campaign for this important issue, would bear the brunt of costs which would be avoidable under alternative methods.

Addressing legislative pay is a long-standing issue with the original Oregon Public Officials Compensation Commission dating back to 1983 with several failed attempts to revive it. Although SJR 34 A re-establishes the commission, it does not have provisions in place to ensure that communities historically most impacted by this issue have a voice at the table. We would urge you to take notice of the work currently being done in the city of Portland and their recent draft proposal by their five-person salary commission which proposed an approach that goes beyond just pay equity but seeks to address the systemic factors within compensation that contribute to differences in pay.<sup>2</sup>

Oregonians have waited decades for the chance to represent their communities and SJR 34 A further delays this opportunity. To give this policy a meaningful chance to work, it must be furnished with the resources to support education campaigns and be led by an inclusive process for developing the policy language. Without these commitments, I am concerned that we will continue an untenable status quo.

Respectfully,

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<sup>1</sup> Ballotpedia, [Ballot measure signature costs](#), 2022

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opb.org/article/2023/06/20/portland-oregon-leaders-salary-increase-proposal-for-2025/>.