

# KY legislature again excluded public via fast-track maneuvers, says critics

BY MCKENNA HORSLEY  
Kentucky Lantern

On the last day of the legislative session, the League of Women Voters of Kentucky renewed its calls for more transparency in how the General Assembly makes laws and sets policies.

Gathered in the Capitol Rotunda Friday, speakers highlighted the "Democracy Principle," or the idea that citizens have a right to be involved in the legislative process and have their voices heard and considered. Citizens are being shut out of the process, the League contends, because the General Assembly uses fast-track maneuvers to speed bills into law, often counter to its own rules, and with little public notice or participation.

The Kentucky chapter of the national organization has been tracking what it says are legislative maneuvers that undermine democracy and in 2023 issued a report, "How Can They Do That? Transparency and Citizen Participation in Kentucky's Legislative Process." It analyzed seven 60-day legislative sessions between 1998 and 2022 and found many instances when the General Assembly did not follow its established process to give Kentuckians time to review and comment on proposed legislation.

Ahead of the 2025 session, the League updated its report and found Kentuckians are still regularly shut out of legislative decisions that affect them.

On Friday, the League pointed to six bills in the 2025 session as examples of fast-tracking, including House Bill 4, which eliminates diversity, equity and inclusion at Kentucky's public universities. The League said Senate Bill 202 began as an innocuous, five-page "shell bill" that quickly became a ban on the sale of hemp-derived beverages until 2026. The bill then was changed into its final 60-page form which places a 5 milligram limit on "intoxicating adult-use cannabinoids" in a 12 ounce beverage.

The League also cited:



Speaking at the Capitol, Ridhi Penmecha, a high school student and member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team, urged lawmakers to open the process to the public including young people. "We're not just being excluded from the present, but we are being cut out of shaping the future," she said. (Kentucky Lantern photo)

■ "House Bill 90, originally focused on free-standing birthing centers, but last-minute additions included abortion-related provisions.

■ "House Bill 241, a two-page bill allowing school districts to adjust calendars due to weather-related emergencies had multiple provisions about virtual education programs added on the Senate floor.

■ "House Bill 695, included last-minute changes to the state Medicaid program by adding mandatory work requirements for able-bodied adults.

■ "House Bill 775, a four-page bill on development districts that transformed to a 108-page bill making substantive taxation changes beyond development districts."

Some of the "fast-track maneuvers" used to move legislation, the League said, included giving bills floor readings before they were heard in committee, introducing a committee sub-

stitute at the last minute, having an irregularly scheduled committee hearing, and giving a bill a floor vote the same day it was heard in committee.

Ridhi Penmecha, a high school student and member of the Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT), said during the Friday rally that students advocating in Frankfort have encountered obstacles that make it "nearly impossible" for them to engage in the legislative process, despite their eagerness to be heard. Shortly after this legislative session began, KSVT filed a lawsuit alleging the state and General Assembly "have failed to maintain the level of commitment to education required" by Kentucky's Constitution and past court decisions.

"We're not just being excluded from the present, but we are being cut out of shaping the future," she said.

In her closing thoughts Fri-

day, Becky Jones, the LWVKY's first vice president, responded to a comment Republican Senate President Robert Stivers made Thursday on the Senate floor. He said if people "want to change the policy in this state, then they will change the makeup of this body."

"On that we agree," Jones told the crowd, who then applauded.

In recent months, the League has faced gripes from Kentucky Republicans who question whether it is truly nonpartisan and who say the group is made up largely of liberal Democrats. The GOP holds a veto-proof supermajority in the House and Senate.

When asked if she's concerned the conversation about legislative transparency is becoming hyper-partisan, Jones told reporters "it could" and said that would be "an unfortunate circumstance." She emphasized that the League does

not endorse political parties or candidates.

"It's unfortunate when being political gets misconstrued with being partisan," Jones said. "There is nothing partisan about protecting the process. That is political, just like fighting for the right to vote was a very political action, and that's the foundation that we stand on."

The national League of Women Voters was founded after the 19th Amendment was ratified to help women navigate their new access to the ballot.

In a Thursday press conference, Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear echoed complaints by Democratic lawmakers about a lack of transparency in how Republican leaders moved legislation in this session. Republicans have rebuked the notion, saying that time is limited in a short 30-day legislative session, such as the one that adjourned sine die on Friday.

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