



TESTIMONY OPPOSING HB 680

State and Local Government Committee
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Chairperson Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelley, and Members of the State and Local Government Committee, I am Pastor Brandi Slaughter, Policy Director for the Ohio Council of Churches.

The Ohio Council of Churches is a partnership of 17 Christian denominations in 23 different organizational configurations throughout the state of Ohio. With over a 100 years of service, the Ohio Council of Churches is one of the oldest state ecumenical councils in the United States. The collaborative represents the largest and most diverse group of Christians in Ohio, encompassing 4,000 congregations and nearly two-million members.

Civic engagement is a priority for our organization. We believe that Christians must stand boldly for our values in *every* election and in *every* community and city across our state. We work to inform, empower and mobilize people in the pews to action. As we are called to be in solidarity with “the least of these”. We organize to ensure safe access to the ballot box for people of color, persons who live in poverty and persons with disabilities.

Protests and violence persists across our nation because the people are unheard. Voting is a way that people can be heard and limiting access to this right is simply wrong. We should be encouraging people to vote their faith and conviction during every election. We should not enact barriers but instead common sense changes to ensure safe and assessable elections. HB 680 does not achieve this. Therefore, we are opposed to the bill.

The 2020 primary had historic low voting participation. I have heard from people about their voting experiences. In addition to concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19, many folks shared that mail delays, postage and printing all made it difficult to participate in the election. There are changes that we can advance to make sure that Ohioans participate and make their voices heard. Some recommendations include:

- Fully fund a vote by mail system with postage paid for both applications and ballots.
- Allow online absentee ballot requests.
- Create a permanent absentee voter list.
- Fund Boards of Elections to handle the heavier vote-by-mail load.

- Establish multiple early vote centers and secure drop boxes per county.
- Obtain administrative approval for an Application Program Interface (API) for online voter registration to enable organizations to track information from online voter registrations.
- Maintain and improve the infrastructure for in-person voting.

The Bible declares “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” — Isaiah 58:1. I am here to lift up my voice. I am here to encourage this body to preserve the voice of the people. The unrest that we are experiencing is because people feel overlooked, unheard, and devalued. We simply should not make it harder for people to vote and lift up their voice and participate in the voting process. Please don’t advance this bill. I am open for any questions you may have.