



Get The Vote Out
Opposition Testimony by Brad Henry, Founder
Ohio House Committee on State and Local Government
June 2, 2020

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Ginter, Ranking Member Kelly, and esteemed Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to offer opposition testimony on HB 680 on behalf of Get The Vote Out.

In June 2018 Get The Vote Out was formed from a coalition of LGBTQAI community organizations.

During the 2020 Primary, GTVO and our allies fielded calls, emails, and social media messages from countless frustrated and confused voters. We ask that policymakers learn from these unprecedented challenges faced by voters and Boards of Elections (BOEs) rather than exacerbate them, which HB 680 would do.

About 85% of Ohioans tend to wait to vote in person on Election Day, and with high voter participation expected in November, voters, poll workers, and election officials could face extremely long lines as seen in 2004. For those who do not remember, voters crowded into polling locations to escape the inclement weather. In many places, there wasn't six inches between voters, let alone six feet. Given that Covid-19 will likely remain a concern, we cannot bury our head in the sand and allow business as usual. Long lines are always bad for democracy, and long lines during a global pandemic would be a public health threat.

But HB 680 is not the answer, because it emulates some of the worst aspects of Ohio's Primary. We should collectively be encouraging record numbers of Ohioans to choose to vote by mail or early voting, so that voter participation can be spread out and managed safely throughout the entire fall electoral cycle. But the approach outlined in HB 680 is too severe and doomed for failure.

Get The Vote Out, along with the League of Women Voters have also been calling for improvements along with Elections Officials. Ohio's vote-by-mail process is painfully slow. A voter requests the absentee application online, the county mails the application to

the voter, the voter mails the application back, and then the county processes that request, either sending the voter a ballot or informing the voter by mail that the request was denied. Each leg of this trip adds time and room for human error.

As we saw in the primary, this process is unnecessarily complicated and confusing for voters, many of whom don't have printers or may not have postage. Others legitimately thought they had requested a ballot online, when in fact, they had only requested an application. Others were denied their applications for simple clerical errors, such as listing the current date instead of their date of birth. Denied voters found out through the mail and had to start the entire process over again, by mailing in a new application.

Others waited weeks for their ballots to come, with many never arriving. We have numerous examples of spouses completing each step at the same time, but only one actually getting their ballot in time to vote. The last minute backstop of being able to vote at the BOE if a ballot doesn't arrive in time is a lackluster solution. I've heard from countless Ohioans who were forced to sit the election out: rural Ohioans who couldn't make the drive to the County Seat on Election Day, senior citizens who were afraid to be exposed to Covid-19, and one Covid-19 positive voter in quarantine who didn't want to expose others.

Other voters mailed their ballots by the deadline of April 27, but slow mail service meant that they were not received in time to be counted, like the 300+ in Butler County. And still hundreds of other ballots that arrived at the BOE on time but had no postmark and therefore were thrown out. Including in some counties where races or issues were decided by fewer votes than what were thrown out.

Bottom-line: Voters struggled to have their voices heard through our arduous, inefficient absentee system. Many voters were cut completely out of the system for no fault of their own. HB 680 actually exacerbates rather than relieves these issues.

The following reforms will go a long way in improving and encouraging vote-by-mail:

- Continue to send applications to all registered voters
- Prepay postage for applications and ballots
- Allow absentee ballots to be requested online
- Change the ballot postmark deadline to Election Day
- Remove the requirement for ballots to be postmarked
- Place multiple dropboxes per county
- Provide funding for BOE expenses associated with higher vote-by-mail volumes

One of the most concerning provisions of HB 680 is the proposed elimination of the last three days of Early Voting. Republicans and Democrats, young and old, participate in Early Voting, and the last weekend is the most popular. Early Voting benefits all voters and the entire election system by reducing strain on Election Day, improving poll worker satisfaction and performance, and allowing for greater social distancing. Rather than reducing it, the General Assembly should allow multiple Early Vote Centers per county,

which would benefit those living in the rural, suburban, and exurban areas, as well as individuals who may struggle with transportation such as people with disabilities, senior citizens, and low-income Ohioans.

Finally, the Ohio General Assembly also needs to improve in-person voting on Election Day, by improving poll worker recruitment and funding BOEs for expenses such as gloves, hand sanitizer, and wipes.

When setting April 28th as the new primary date, the Ohio General Assembly didn't listen to Secretary of State LaRose, the Ohio Association of Election Officials, or voter advocates like the League. Nearly everything we said would happen did, with BOEs struggling to fulfill their sacred duties under great duress, and disenfranchisement of voters across. We are now aligned again on many of the proposals that I have suggested to you today. Please trust that we are elections experts. BOEs and Secretary LaRose have a strong understanding of operational challenges and needs, and you need not look any further to find an organization that better understands the lived experiences of voters.

Ohio can and must do better than the 2020 Primary, and HB 680 is the absolute in the wrong direction. I'm happy to answer questions now, and I'd like the opportunity to discuss our concerns and proposed solutions with each of you as well. You may contact me at gtvoohio@gmail.com or 614.203.1457.