
Opposition Testimony
House Bill 294: OHIO ELECTION SECURITY, MODERNIZATION ACT
House Government Oversight Committee
Jen Miller, League of Women Voters of Ohio
November 16, 2022

Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Government Oversight Committee:

I am the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio. Thank you for allowing me to testify today on behalf of our members, who live in every Congressional District, each state Senate District, and all but five Ohio House Districts. Voters of all ages, races, zip codes, and beliefs are our priority, which is why I'm here today testifying against Substitute House Bill 294. Ohio's election system would benefit from a number of common sense improvements, but we ask you to reject this bill.

We support a few provisions such as appropriations for e-poll books, establishing online absentee requests, and requiring standards for print vendors. This bill on balance, however, makes elections unnecessarily more complicated, expensive, and inefficient for Boards of Elections (BOEs) and voters alike.

ABSENTEE VOTING

Even prior to the pandemic, voting absentee has been the preferred method of voting for many Ohioans including senior citizens, voters with disabilities, college students, and those who travel for work. Absentee voting certainly helped Ohio make our electoral process more resilient during the pandemic, and preliminary data from this past election shows that rural voters were more likely to vote absentee than voters from more populous counties.

Online absentee requests are a commonsense improvement that eases the process for voters, while also reducing administration time and overhead for Boards of Elections. We firmly support online absentee requests, but the overall impact of this bill will be negative for absentee voters.

Ohio Secretaries of State of both parties have mailed absentee ballot request forms to voters. The form is a good reminder that an election is coming and is a valuable service to those who cannot request an absentee ballot through a newly established online portal. Sending out absentee ballots to every registered voter could also be used to check the accuracy of the voter rolls. The forms that are returned as undeliverable could then be flagged and further investigated to determine if those

voters are deceased or have moved. Instead of preventing the Secretary of State from sending absentee ballot requests, the state should require and fund these mailings for every election, as well as provide pre-paid postage.

The changes presented in SUB HB 294 regarding absentee voting by mail only further complicate an already confusing process and timeline. SUB HB294 presents two different deadlines for requesting an absentee ballot. Voters using the paper absentee request form must do so by 7 days before the election. Voters using the online system must do so within 10 days before an election. Although a new online request system for absentee ballots is welcome, imposing a different deadline to request an absentee ballot is unnecessarily confusing.

Furthermore, current law allows 10 days for a postmarked ballot to reach the Board of Elections; SUB HB 294 decreases that allowance to 7 days. The United States Postal Service capacity is stretched during election season, and the change to 7 days will likely result in voted ballots being denied by Boards of Elections. This shorter deadline will also place additional strain on voters serving in the military, who deserve more ballot access - not less. Finally, we'd like to add that the deadline to postmark an absentee ballot the day before Election Day is arbitrary and is regularly misunderstood by voters; to ease confusion and improve access, we suggest changing the requirement to be having a ballot postmarked by Election Day.

DROP BOXES

We are also deeply concerned that the sub-bill still leaves inadequate access to drop boxes. Research by Harvard suggests that the ability to use a drop box increases the confidence voters have that their votes will be counted and increases trust in the voting process. Drop boxes weigh as much as 600 pounds, have 24-hour video surveillance, and are weather and fire resistant. Utilizing drop boxes is not only more secure than using the postal service, it is a more efficient and direct method of submitting voter registration forms, absentee ballots, and campaign finance filings. Some counties even use them for interoffice mail between departments.

Rather than limiting the location and dates that drop boxes are available, this body should allow multiple drop box locations per county and require they be available well before the voter registration deadline of 30 days prior to Election Day. This one location rule harms those who do not live close to the county seat and/or do not drive, including rural Ohioans, seniors, voters with disabilities, and low-income voters.

If this body still remains opposed to multiple drop boxes per county, we request that you instead allow Boards of Elections to set up bipartisan teams in public spaces like libraries and festivals to collect ballots. We would also ask that you allow more individuals to return these ballots on behalf of a voter including grandchildren, neighbors, and roommates.

EARLY VOTING

Benefits of Early Voting include, reduced lines on Election Day, improved poll worker performance, the ability to identify and correct glitches or errors in the system, greater access to voting, and higher voter satisfaction. We support codifying the Early Voting schedule into statute, and we could be swayed to support the discontinuation of early voting on the last Monday before the Election, but those hours need to be reallocated to the weekend. Voters in counties with populations large

and small face lines during the last weekend of early voting, and often voters expect the hours on Saturday to be the same on Sunday. Removing those 6 hours on Monday, and making the Saturday and Sunday hours 8am -5pm is a commonsense solution that will reduce confusion and frustration among voters and not require BOEs to remain open at the times listed in the sub bill in which voters are far less likely to appear.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter roll maintenance is inconsistent across 88 counties, and Secretary of State Larose has shared that this county-by-county voter registration system in Ohio is “unacceptably messy, and that it is “prone to human error”. We couldn’t agree more, which is why we are disappointed that the updated legislation has removed Automated Voter Registration (AVR).

AVR uses readily available information to electronically update voter registration. It effectively streamlines the process of updating the voter registration rolls, simplifying the process for Boards of Elections and voters alike. Some form of AVR is used in 22 states and the District of Columbia, including West Virginia, Georgia, and Michigan.

AVR is a commonsense solution supported by diverse stakeholders. It removes barriers to registration while improving the accuracy of the voter rolls overall and reducing administrative costs for BOEs. Processing paper voter registration forms requires deciphering sloppy handwriting, following up with voters regarding missing information or errors, and paying overtime and additional temporary staff to process applications in a timely fashion before Election Day.

Our elections system is the bedrock of our representative democracy, and so we ask this body to not rush changes to the system without deliberation in which you hear the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Abraham Lincoln once said “Elections belong to the people,” and so should this process. Please do not create unnecessary barriers for Ohio voters or unnecessary red tape for Boards of Elections.

We ask you to reject this legislation, which would harm access to the ballot and could limit voter participation among active duty military, senior citizens, people with disabilities, students, rural Ohioans, low-income, communities of color, and historically disenfranchised groups. We ask you to uphold your oath to defend and serve ALL Ohio voters by rejecting this legislation.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio was formed in May 1920 out of Ohio’s woman suffrage movement. The League is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The League has over 4000 members and 34 local Leagues across the Buckeye State.