

OPPONENT TESTIMONY OF:

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IN OPPOSITION OF:

HB 294 & Sub. HB 294: Enact Ohio Election Security and Modernization Act

House Government Oversight Committee

[Columbus, OH, 12/1/22] — Dear Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Government Oversight Committee. My name is Amina Barhumi and I am the Executive Director for the Ohio Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, known as CAIR-Ohio. CAIR-Ohio is a 501c3, nonpartisan civil liberties and advocacy organization that protects and defends the rights of Muslims to freely practice their faith. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on HB Bill 294.

I join CAIR-Ohio in urging you to vote no on HB 294, and its new version Sub. House Bill 294. The new version of this bill no longer includes what were the most significant positive components of the original HB 294 ---automated voter registration and voter verification. Both HB 294, and Sub. HB 294 would only create new barriers to the ballot box and make it harder for Ohioans to vote. Impacting the most vulnerable. In 2020, Ohio conducted one of the most secure elections in its history with record-breaking voter turnout. We must build on that success, improve on it, not create additional barriers. While 2020 saw historic turnout for the presidential election, voter suppression remains a critical issue and research shows it persists and reflects racial discrimination in the voting process. We must protect and expand voting access, instead of creating more barriers through measures in Sub. HB 294.

We would like to point out some of the measures that make it more difficult to vote. Sub. HB 294 eliminates the last day of early voting, and while the lost hours are reallocated during the weekdays, weekend hours are more convenient and include the busiest voting hours based on previous elections. Sub. HB 294 codifies early voting schedule with variable weekday hours during the final week of early voting creating confusion for voters.

For Muslims in particular, long wait times are most cited obstacle to voting, and a quarter of Muslims eligible to vote faced long wait times when casting a ballot in the past four years. Longer wait times are more often experienced by racial and ethnic minorities and poorer precincts and reflect on the lack of electoral resources in these precincts. Long waits are particularly challenging for voters with limited financial resources, often forcing them to forgo voting at all if they cannot afford to take a day off work. (Institute for Social Policy & Understanding's in their 2022 American Muslim Poll)

That is why the ability to cast an absentee ballot is so important, reducing the chance of lines at the polls on Election Day. However, with limits and barriers included in the new provision of Sub. HB 294, it will make it less likely for Ohio voters to even be able to use this option. For instance, a provision in Sub. HB 294 prohibits the Secretary of State, Board of Election or any public official from sending unsolicited absentee ballot request forms. These mailings serve as a reminder for voters and are often used by voters. Additionally, Sub. HB 294 prohibits prepaid return postage for absentee ballot requests and absentee ballots, harming low-income voters, and the most vulnerable in our communities and limiting their access to exercise their civic duty.

Sub. HB 294 constricts and shortens the time for Boards to accept voted ballots – with a postmark prior to the election – from 10 days after Election Day to 7 days after Election Day.

This shortened deadline also applies to overseas and military voters. Sub. HB 294 limits County Boards of Election to 3 drop boxes, only allows them to be set up at the county board office, and only permits their use starting 28 days before an election. Additionally, limiting and confining the ballot box locations to the County Board of Election, forces voters to pay postage and penalizes low-income voters. Sub. HB 294 eliminates curbside voting provisions that were in the original HB 294. Sub. HB 294 continues the prohibition of grandchildren dropping off absentee ballots and additionally creates new criminal penalties for unauthorized ballot returns.

Together, all these measures would disproportionately impact Black and brown voters, students, voters with disabilities, low-income Ohioans, active-duty military, rural voters and seniors.

It is particularly important to note, that Muslims are more likely than any other faith or non-faith group to face obstacles at the ballot box according to research conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. And we see additional obstacles compounded even outside of voting with the citizenship requirement status to be listed on Ohio driver's licenses in the Sub. HB 294 version.

This will have a chilling impact on immigrants and noncitizens, outside of the consideration of voting. We know through the discrimination complaints and issues that our clients face, that immigrants from across the world are often misclassified due to bias. Outlining a person's citizen status on their ID will potentially open doors for discrimination, prejudice, and oppression in the most basic interactions. Interactions that include travelling, banking, making a purchase that requires an ID such as medications, while completing an application process, applying for a job, purchasing a car, or registering your child in school. These IDs will obstruct everyday interactions for many immigrants.

According to the American Immigration Council, Ohio is home to a growing community of immigrants. The top countries from which foreign-born residents immigrate to Ohio are India, Mexico, China, the Philippines, and Germany. Ohio benefits from immigrants' active participation in the economy: immigrants account for one in seven Ohioans working in computer sciences as well as one in eight workers in the life, physical, and social sciences. As neighbors, business owners, taxpayers, and workers, immigrants are an integral part of Ohio's diverse and thriving communities and make extensive contributions that benefit all.

Election security is important. But so is the integrity of our democracy. And so is the freedom and right to cast a ballot and vote. We know the legislature can implement common-sense reforms without restricting voting rights. There are many ways we could improve voting and elections in Ohio: same day registration, multiple early vote centers, and additional drop boxes. None of the unnecessary voting restrictions in Sub. House Bill 294 solves any problems, they simply make it harder to vote. This bill will prevent already disenfranchised communities from having their voices heard. Every Ohioan should have fair and equal access to the ballot box. I am asking you to protect our most fundamental right in America – the right to vote – and remove the measures that only create barriers in Sub. HB 294.

