



December 1, 2022

To Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Government Oversight Committee, my name is Maria Bruno and I am the Public Policy Director of Equality Ohio, a nonpartisan statewide LGBTQ+ education and advocacy organization.

As an organization that values civil rights and American freedom, Equality Ohio asks you to vote NO on House Bill 294. Ohioans deserve the freedom to vote, and our organization opposes the proposed arbitrary barriers to the ballot outlined in HB 294 that don't make elections safer, but instead make voting more difficult.

There are a lot of cliches about the right to vote: It's the bedrock of democracy; It's an opportunity to make your voice heard; It's a way to hold politicians accountable; It's what makes this a free country. Each of those statements—however trite they might sound—is fundamentally true. The right to both choose and fire the politicians who are supposed to be representing one's interests, and the ability to decide who is in one's government is *foundational* to all of our other rights. It is a bedrock democratic principle that all people of any political ideology must be guaranteed. There is nothing partisan about demanding that every eligible voter has the opportunity to cast a ballot.

It's particularly important to protect voting access for our most marginalized neighbors, including LGBTQ+ Ohioans, Black and Brown voters, students, voters with disabilities, low-income Ohioans, active duty military, rural voters and seniors, and others who have historically faced disproportionate barriers to voting. As drafted, this bill does much more harm than good in advancing voting protections. And it would harm Ohio's already marginalized communities most. Confusing and strict identification requirements and limitations on voting options, for example, can particularly harm gender diverse community members, who may already struggle to access accurate identity documents.

LGBTQ+ people are in every single one of our Ohio communities and hold a wide range of political ideologies. We are part of *all* religious, racial, and ethnic communities. Indeed, we are often younger and hold *more* diverse identities than other community members. That means LGBTQ+ Ohioans are even more likely to suffer the consequences of limited access and confusing, strict rules around voting.

Barriers to voting result in voters being denied the opportunity to pick the people who represent them. Barriers give more control to parties and special interest groups who have an increased incentive to villainize the other political party, along with anyone who disagrees with them or simply lives differently than they do. LGBTQ+ individuals are often first in the line of fire during this mudslinging. We don't need to add any more fuel to the polarization and culture wars that have taken over our state's political discourse.



I have spent a lot of time studying how best to engage disillusioned Ohioans without relying on demonizing other people or playing party politics. And let me tell you, there are a lot of disillusioned Ohioans. I regularly hear things like, “Why bother to vote? Politicians don’t care about what the people think.” Or “I try not to get too worked up about things I can’t do anything about.”

I don’t hear people say they are so satisfied with their government that they don’t feel a need to participate in elections. I hear people who have completely resigned themselves from ever believing they would be heard, even if they bothered to speak up.

Attempts such as those proposed in HB 294 as drafted only further reinforce this disillusionment in our elected leaders.

To be clear, changes to voting laws are most certainly needed; but they are not the changes reflected here. We should be facilitating *easier* access to the ballot box through increased access to voting by mail, more drop boxes instead of fewer, additional early voting days, retained curbside voting, and automated voter registration.

Ohio’s elections are secure. Our Republican Secretary of State has said as much a thousand times before, and many of the people on this very committee were just reelected less than a month ago under our current set of rules on an Election Day that by all accounts ran smoothly and securely.

No politician should be scared of a fair fight. Allowing all eligible voters to freely, easily, and conveniently participate in the voting process is the best way to ensure that the best candidate wins.

Please don’t rush through a bad bill in the frenzy of Lame Duck when we could be thoughtfully modernizing our election system to ensure all eligible voters are able to cast a ballot. Please reject HB 294 and instead pass practical reforms that expand—rather than curb—ballot access.