

Rev Joan VanBecelaere
Columbus, OH
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Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown and members of the Government Oversight Committee

I am Rev Joan VanBecelaere, a retired Unitarian Universalist minister. I'm here to ask you to vote against passage of substitute HB 294 as it now stands.

The original version of this bill had issues, but it also the advantage of including automated voter registration and verification which would have helped keep registrations up to date and organized voter records. But this modernization element has been removed from the proposed bill with nothing to replace it.

Instead, this amended bill now ends curbside voting which is used by those who are elderly or disabled or immune compromised. Not all polling places are accessibly, In 2016, 83% of polling places examined by the Gov Accountability Office had at least one physical impediment to voting for disabled and elderly voters. And given recent disinformation campaigns, many elderly folk do not trust mail in ballots even though the process here in Ohio is strong. Others simply no longer trust the post office given its recent history of backlogs. How will it help election security to make it harder for the elderly, disabled and sick to vote?

And this bill limits the days, location and number of ballot drop boxes which only serves to make it harder for rural folk, those without transportation, and those working long hours or 2 jobs to drop off an absentee ballot early.

Some Ohio officials have talked about drop boxes as simply a "convenience" for voting. But increasing the accessibility of drop boxes is not a matter of making things convenient. It's a matter of making voting accessible so folk who want to vote - are able to vote. When talking about our rights, we are not talking about matters of convenience. We are talking about the need for accessibility.

It hasn't been that long ago that I went through the hassle of getting the new Ohio Compliant Driver's License. This bill would seem to require that I go through that mess again just to have citizenship noted on the license even though I have been legally registered to vote for many years. How many people, conservative or liberal, will be able to get this citizenship ID before the next election? And does this also mean that college students who move to Ohio for school will be disenfranchised?

Then, this bill takes what has been a steady and reliable schedule of early voting hours and makes it a confusing set of variables days and hours during the last week of early voting.

We all know that Ohio does not have a massive election cheating problem. I read in the papers that about 75 folk out the hundreds of thousands who voted in Ohio in 2020 were suspected of voting illegally in some way. These numbers are very small and attests to the effectiveness of the safeguards already in our state's voting procedures.

If this bill doesn't modernize records and the security measures are solutions in search of a problem and it makes it harder for folk, young and old, vote, why do we need this bill?

Honestly, the only reason I can see for this substitute bill as it now stands is some people want to use its passage as part of election campaigns for 2024. Of course, it's perfectly great if elected officials run campaigns based on their records and accomplishments. That's what voters want to know. But to pass a bill that impedes voter accessibility for campaign talking points is just not right.

This is not a matter of liberal or conservative or a particular party agenda. This is a matter of right and wrong. This is a matter of working to enable all Ohio citizens to participate in free and fair elections. In a democracy, this participation is a sacred duty to be protected and promoted, not impeded.

But if we can't bring ourselves to make voting more accessible for one reason or another, then the least we can do is not make it harder. So please do not pass substitute HB 294 in this current form.