



# Ohio Environmental Council [ Action Fund ]

**Opponent Testimony of Chris Tavenor, Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund  
Substitute House Bill 294  
House Government Oversight Committee  
December 7, 2022**

Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown and Members of the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today on Substitute House Bill 294. My name is Chris Tavenor, Managing Director of Democracy Policy for the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) Action Fund. At the OEC Action Fund, we consistently say we can only ensure a healthy environment if we also have a healthy democracy. I am submitting another round of testimony on Substitute House Bill 294 to emphasize the OEC Action Fund's position that this bill is not right for Ohioans.

Two weeks ago, the OEC Action Fund provided its testimony on the substitute version of HB 294 introduced prior to the last House Government Oversight Committee. As of writing this testimony, we have not seen any additional proposed amendments, but if amendments are made, our precise testimony may shift. As it stands, the OEC Action Fund continues to oppose Sub. HB 294. Our written testimony herein will emphasize the points made two weeks ago in the last meeting of this committee, via our oral testimony.

Personally, I have worked the polls in multiple elections, including both general elections, mid-terms, and primaries. I've witnessed our voting system empower Ohioans to participate in our democracy—I've also witnessed overly restrictive rules confuse voters and discourage them from voting. For example, in 2016 I worked the polls at the Ohio Union, one of the largest polling locations in the state. It's also a location that serves many of our youngest and newest voters. I saw many college students thoroughly confused by whether they could vote, where they were supposed to vote, and what IDs they could bring. That initial interaction with our voting system can impact their perspective on voting for years to come.

Those experiences have entrenched within me a commitment to fighting for a truly participatory democracy, a democracy where we are encouraging all Ohioans to vote and implementing systems that make it incredibly easy to do so. At the same time, we can easily ensure those elections are secure. This is not an either/or proposition—we can know our voting systems have integrity while also developing policies that eliminate confusing barriers.

When the OEC Action Fund looks at Sub. HB 294, we see a bill that simply creates additional barriers to voting without adding much at all to improve the voter experience. Simply put, the only significant positive section of Sub. HB 294 is the creation of an electronic absentee ballot request system, a process Ohioans have needed for many years—yet even that proposed system has additional barriers over the regular absentee ballot request system.

In no particular order, here's a non-exhaustive list of issues the OEC Action Fund has identified with Sub. HB 294:

- The automated voter registration system proposed in the bill has been removed. Rather than removing that system, the bill should implement an actual automatic voter registration system, rather than an *automated* one.
- Sub HB 294 has now required absentee ballot requests to occur on a form provided by the Secretary of State, while right now Ohioans can make the request as long as the correct information is provided. This is an unnecessarily restrictive change to the absentee ballot request system.
- The bill now proposes an increase to the number of electors required to sign a petition for a county to propose an alternative form of government, from 3% to 10%. The OEC Action Fund sees no reason to make it more difficult for counties to decide specifically how their government should be organized.

We'd also like to highlight some of the already pre-existing issues that continue from the original bill to Sub. HB 294:

- Eliminates Early Voting on the Monday before Election Day
- Explicitly prohibits the payment of prepaid postage for absentee ballots
- Prohibits a Board of Elections from counting a ballot if it is not included in the specific envelopes sent to voters

There does seem to be two positive change in the Substitute Bill—expanding the drop box timeline for boards of elections back out to the full month. However, this change does not go far enough—Boards of Elections should be empowered to develop a robust drop box system throughout their counties. In addition, the provisions prohibiting the Secretary of State or other officials from sending absentee ballots to voters have been removed. We do applaud this change.

In sum, the OEC Action Fund truly wishes it could support this bill and its potential for an automatic voter registration system and an online absentee ballot request system. If only those two systems were in the bill, we would be proponents. Instead, Sub. HB 294 changes the law in too many ways, creating new barriers to Ohioans who fully deserve a comprehensive

opportunity to vote. We urge this Committee, and all Ohio legislators, to reconsider Sub. HB 294, instead developing legislation that thoroughly empowers Ohioans to vote in whatever way is easiest for them.

Otherwise, absent significant amendments, the OEC Action Fund urges a no vote on Sub. HB 294, both in Committee and on the House floor.

Chair Wilkin and Members of the committee, thank you for considering our perspective and our recommendations. I would be happy to answer any questions if you have them.

Respectfully submitted,

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