



Opponent Testimony
House Bill 54
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OPAWL – Building AAPI Feminist Leadership
Ohio House Finance Committee
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Chairman Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking member Sweeney and members of the House Finance Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Jona Hilario, I am a resident of Columbus, Ohio and Co-Director at OPAWL. We are a statewide grassroots community of Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women and non-binary people in Ohio. Our organization is a multi-ethnic, multi-generational community and our over 300 members represent the diverse diaspora from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

OPAWL is concerned about the anti-voter provisions contained in HB54. The ability to vote is a fundamental right in our democracy. To exercise that right, however, eligible citizens must first successfully register to vote. Registration thus stands as a gateway to both electoral participation and power. The enduring exclusion of eligible citizens from the voter rolls remains a serious problem today. The registration rates for certain groups of citizens, including racial and ethnic minorities, naturalized citizens and young adults, is troublingly low, leaving these groups and their interests systematically under-represented in the electorate.

While Asian Americans and Latinos make up the country's top two fastest-growing electorate by race, their voter registration rates remain the lowest of the racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.¹

¹ Hansi Lo Wang, *Why there's a long-standing voter registration gap for Latinos and Asian Americans*, NPR, Apr. 2, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/04/02/1238751749/voter-registration-gap-racial>.



Voter restrictions disproportionately affect people of color and naturalized citizens. I can speak firsthand to this. Last year, ahead of the Presidential election, I received a letter from the Ohio Secretary of State's Office that stated that I was suspected for being a noncitizen illegally on the voter roll. I was asked to provide documentation verifying my citizenship, or otherwise risk having my voter registration cancelled. I have been a U.S. citizen since 2022 and at that point have already had the privilege of voting twice, without issues in August and November of 2023. The Secretary of State's Office made a mistake, and I later learned that there were other naturalized citizens like me who received the same threatening letter.² This was the result of an overzealous audit conducted by the Secretary of State's office using records from the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.³

Elections in Ohio are secure and accurate. The Secretary of State's recent audit of the 2024 general election shows a 99.99 percent accuracy rate.⁴

The provision in HB 54 requiring a person to present proof of citizenship in order to register to vote at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles does not make our elections more secure. Instead, it creates unnecessary barriers to registration for eligible voters.

There are many Americans who do not have documentary proof of citizenship readily available. National surveys indicate that up to 7 percent of U.S. citizens lack "ready access to citizenship documents."⁵ Though U.S. birth certificates can satisfy such a requirement, not every citizen has qualifying birth certificates. For example, groups of citizens born outside hospitals, including citizens born in rural areas or Native American reservations, are less likely to have qualifying birth certificates. Birth

² See Nick Evens, *Naturalized citizen targeted in recent voter audit argues Ohio Secretary of State not following law*, Ohio Capital Journal, Aug. 19, 2024, <https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2024/08/19/naturalized-citizen-targeted-in-recent-voter-audit-argues-ohio-secretary-of-state-not-following-law/>.

³ <https://www.ohiosos.gov/media-center/press-releases/2024/2024-05-14a/>

⁴ <https://www.ohiosos.gov/media-center/press-releases/2024/2024-12-30/>

⁵ Brennan Center, *Citizens Without Proof*, Nov. 2006, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-without-proof>.



certificates may also be inadequate documentation because of misspelling or name changes.

Documentary proof of citizenship requirements also create an obstacle for children adopted by U.S. citizens and for “derivative citizens” – foreign born minors who become citizens automatically when their parents naturalize.⁶

Naturalized citizens will not be able to use birth certificates to prove citizenship, and will have to mainly rely on certificates of naturalization or citizenship, but not all eligible citizens will possess the required certificates. Such documents may be lost or destroyed. The cost of ordering a replacement certificate is between \$505–555.⁷ Passports present many of the same issues. Passports are expensive and difficult to obtain, and they are only available to citizens who already have other documentary proof of citizenship.

For those citizens lacking documents for whatever reason, proof-of citizenship requirements present a new and formidable obstacle to voter registration. The obstacles are greatest for the most vulnerable citizens who may lack the resources or ability to track down and obtain documents verifying their citizenship.

All eligible citizens should have equal access to the right to vote, but proof-of-citizenship requirements erect higher barriers to registration for certain categories of citizens. Citizens who are members of traditionally disenfranchised groups, as well as citizens who face unique challenges – whether by age, gender, income, language-proficiency, or naturalization status – are more likely to be deterred or prevented from registering.

Every Ohioan registering to vote must already affirm their citizenship under penalty of perjury upon registration. That is the law. Moreover, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 requires states to accept federal voter registration forms, which do not have a proof of citizenship requirement.

⁶ See 8 U.S.C. §1431 (2006).

⁷ USCIS, Form G-1055 Fee Schedule, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/g-1055?form=n-565>.



In Ohio, our elections are safe and secure. Our voter registration rate and turnout, however, is lacking. Ohio is home to approximately 2 million eligible but unregistered voters.⁸ Statewide, fewer Ohioans voted last year than in 2020.⁹ Policymakers who are serious about strengthening our elections should focus on making sure that all eligible voters have fair and equal access to the polls.

Respectfully submitted,

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<https://signalcleveland.org/invisibilized-hundreds-of-thousands-of-eligible-ohio-voters-are-left-behind-by-political-campaigns-election-2024/>

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<https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/2024/12/02/ohio-voter-turnout-down-in-2024-especially-in-democratic-cities/76702072007/>