

I was born in Ohio and have lived here most of my life. I love our state, and simply assumed, growing up, that our state's leaders would be committed to the democratic process, and would listen to their voters. I didn't understand then that our state's leaders can effectively choose their own voters, and, in order to stay in power, are even willing to dilute voting rights, the most sacred hallmark of any working democracy.

After the 2020 election, Secretary of State LaRose said that the election had been one of the most secure in Ohio's history, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Even so, the state legislature introduced HB 294, a bill that, while it originally included some *potentially* good voting reform provisions such as automated voter registration and online absentee ballot requests, it also included a host of anti-voter provisions such as limiting access to ballot drop boxes, imposing confusing voter-ID requirements, canceling early voting the Monday before Election Day, and shortening the absentee ballot request period.

No action had been taken on HB 294 until now, when Republican members of the House Government Oversight Committee seem to be in a hurry to pass new voting restrictions during this lame duck session. While the original bill at least contained some measures that would support voting rights, the new Substitute HB 294 has eliminated those measures (namely, automated voter registration and verification). Sub. HB 294 will clearly make it more difficult for Ohioans to vote. Why would our secretary of state and our legislators champion such a bill?

Has Ohio seen evidence of voter fraud? Was the 2020 election NOT actually the most secure in Ohio's history? Are there good reasons to ignore voting rights, the bedrock of any working democracy, and make it more difficult for people to vote? If so, what are they?

Already, we've seen the legislature attach a measure to State Issue Two that was unrelated to the other half of the measure, but was used in such a way as to confuse midterm voters, who generally didn't realize they would be prohibiting the ability of 17-year-old students turning 18 by Election Day to register.

We MUST protect the right to vote, especially for our most vulnerable citizens, including Black and Brown voters, students, voters with disabilities, low-income Ohioans, active duty military, rural voters, and seniors. Ohioans DESERVE the freedom to vote.

Worried about safety? Secretary of State LaRose has already demonstrated that it is possible to have safe and secure elections without sacrificing access to the ballot. This past success should encourage him – and any secretary of state - to go even farther to help ensure that as many voices as possible are heard.

I have yet to hear any reasonable arguments for making voting more onerous and difficult. I suspect that such efforts have more to do with protecting power than protecting the rights of Ohioans, which saddens me greatly.

Sub. HB 294 MUST NOT PASS. Please do not allow this bill to go farther.
Thank you.

Deborah Cooper