



December 7, 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 barriers to the ballot outlined in HB 294 that don't make elections safer, and 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. The nearly half million LGBTQ+ people in Ohio that Equality Ohio works to protect every day are in every single part of the state and hold a wide range of political ideologies. We are part of *all* religious, racial, and ethnic communities, and every generation. We are also a steadily increasing percentage of Ohio's voting population.

As drafted, this bill does much more harm than good in advancing voting protections. And this bill would disproportionately harm Ohio's already marginalized communities such as those who are Black, Brown, low-income, students, active duty military, rural, disabled, or seniors. LGBTQ+ Ohioans' intersectional identities mean our community is even more likely to suffer the consequences of limited ballot access and confusing, strict rules around voting.

Confusing and strict identification requirements, for example, can particularly harm gender diverse community members, who may already struggle to access accurate identity documents. There are financial costs and time commitments related to getting copies of birth certificates and other necessary documents. There are also no provisions regarding education or outreach to voters to inform them of this rule change, let alone assist them in getting the necessary documentation.

Adding more inconvenience just for the sake of it is exactly the kind of needless legislation that disempowers voters. Barriers such as those proposed in HB 294 only further reinforce Ohio



voters' growing disillusionment towards our election system and elected officials. And there are a *lot* of disillusioned Ohio voters.

Most Ohio voters aren't interested in the empty rhetoric that much of our political discourse has become. They're appalled by the weaponization of our lawmaking process for political points. This was illustrated by the lack of enthusiasm from Ohio voters this year, despite the many consequential races and issues on the ballot. In a year that other states saw record breaking turnout, Ohio actually had *lower* turnout than 2018. **Ohio's voter participation already isn't trending the right way, and this won't help.**

When eligible Ohio voters can't access the ballot, they're being denied the opportunity to pick the people who represent them, and parties and special interest groups get even more powerful. Political parties and special interest groups don't need more power, and that's not what this committee should be prioritizing. This committee should be legislating to *preserve* the power of the *people* of this state, not to further dismantle it.

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.

And perhaps most importantly, there's no rational basis for this added burden on voters, so the potential harm greatly outweighs the potential benefit. 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 elected less than a month ago under our current set of rules on an Election Day that by all accounts ran smoothly and securely.

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, and automated voter registration.

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.