

OPPONENT TESTIMONY OF:

Victoria Hickcox

5740 Gateway Blvd, Suite 201

Mason, OH 45040

IN OPPOSITION OF:

HB 294 & Sub. HB 294: Enact Ohio Election Security and Modernization Act

House Government Oversight Committee

[Columbus, OH, 12/7/22] — Dear Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the House Government Oversight Committee. My name is Victoria Hickcox, and I am the Outreach Director for CAIR-Ohio, a 501c3, nonpartisan, civil liberties and advocacy organization that protects and defends the rights of Muslims to freely practice their faith. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on House Bill 294.

I join CAIR-Ohio in urging you to vote no on HB 294. The latest version of this bill no longer includes what were positive components of the original bill—automated voter registration and voter verification. The latest version would only create more barriers to the ballot box and make it harder for Ohioans to vote.

In 2020, Ohio conducted one of the most secure elections in its history with record-breaking voter turnout. We must build on that success and improve on it—not create additional barriers. While 2020 saw historic turnout for the presidential election, voter suppression remains a critical issue and research shows it persists and reflects racial discrimination in the voting process.

We would like to point out some of the measures that would make it more difficult to vote.

Sub. HB 294 eliminates the last day of early voting, and while the lost hours are reallocated during the weekdays, weekend hours are more convenient and include the busiest voting hours based on previous elections. It also codifies an early voting schedule with variable weekday hours during the final week of early voting, creating confusion for voters.

For Muslims in particular, long wait times are the most cited obstacle to voting, and a quarter of Muslims eligible to vote faced long wait times when casting a ballot in the past four years. Longer wait times are more often experienced by racial and ethnic minorities, and poorer areas, reflecting the lack of electoral resources in these precincts. Long waits are particularly challenging for voters with limited financial resources, often forcing them to forgo voting at all if they cannot afford to take a day off work. (*Institute for Social Policy & Understanding's 2022 American Muslim Poll*)

That is why the ability to cast an absentee ballot is so important, reducing the chance of lines at the polls on Election Day. However, with limits and barriers included in the new provisions, it will make it less likely for Ohio voters to use this option. A provision in the sub bill prohibits any public official from sending unsolicited absentee ballot request forms. These mailings are often

used by voters and serve as an important reminder prior to an election. Additionally, it prohibits prepaid return postage for absentee ballots and requests—harming low-income voters, and the most vulnerable in our communities, and limiting their access to exercise their civic duty.

The latest version limits County Boards of Election to 3 drop boxes, restricts set up to county board offices, and only permits their use starting 28 days before an election. Limiting and confining the ballot box locations force voters to pay postage and penalize low-income voters.

Together, all these measures along with most of the new provisions would disproportionately impact Black and brown voters, students, voters with disabilities, low-income Ohioans, active-duty military, rural voters, and seniors.

It is particularly important to note, that Muslims are more likely than any other faith or non-faith group to face obstacles at the ballot box according to research conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. And we see additional obstacles compounded even outside of voting with the citizenship requirement status to be listed on Ohio driver's licenses in the sub bill.

This will have a chilling impact on immigrants and noncitizens, outside of the consideration of voting. We know through the discrimination complaints and issues that our clients face, that immigrants from across the world are often misclassified due to bias. Outlining a person's citizen status on their ID will potentially open doors for discrimination, prejudice, and oppression in the most basic interactions. Interactions that include travelling, banking, making a purchase that requires an ID such as medications, applying for a job, purchasing a car, or registering a child in school. These IDs will obstruct everyday interactions for many immigrants.

Election security is important. But so is the integrity of our democracy. And so is the freedom and right to cast a ballot. We know the legislature can implement common-sense reforms without restricting voting rights. There are many ways we could improve voting and elections in Ohio: same day registration, multiple early vote centers, and additional drop boxes. None of the unnecessary voting restrictions in Sub. House Bill 294 solves any problems, they simply make it harder to vote. This bill will prevent already disenfranchised communities from having their voices heard. Every Ohioan should have fair and equal access to the ballot box. I am asking you to protect our most fundamental right in America—the right to vote—and remove the measures that only create barriers. Vote no on HB 294 in committee and on the House floor.