



# Ohio Environmental Council [ Action Fund ]

**Opponent Testimony of Chris Tavenor, Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund  
Substitute House Bill 458  
Senate Local Government and Elections Committee  
December 12, 2022**

Chair Gavarone, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath and Members of the Ohio Senate Local Government and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today on Substitute House Bill 458. 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. This bill is not right for Ohioans—following an election where Ohio's voter turnout lagged far behind neighboring states like Michigan and Pennsylvania, we should be making it easier to vote, not creating additional barriers.

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 458, we see a bill that simply creates additional barriers to voting without adding much at all to improve the voter experience. There are ideas within Sub. HB 458 that hold merit—paying for everyone to have access to a state ID card is an excellent policy, but it should not come at the cost of eliminating valid forms of ID at the polls.

Sub. HB 458 also includes language that would bar the Secretary of State from sending Ohioans absentee ballot applications, as well as paying for the postage for absentee ballots. In

doing so, we are creating unnecessary barriers for voters. I know this past year, I received an absentee ballot application in the mail to my house, and it was an incredibly appreciated gesture. I have friends for whom that application served as an important reminder to vote. The Secretary of State can provide an essential service to Ohio voters by mailing them an application and reminding them of the many ways they can vote, and we shouldn't bar that process.

The OEC Action Fund also opposes the choice to restrict the number of drop boxes a county may utilize. We should be expanding drop box access, rather than limiting it, especially for our counties with over a million voters. Similarly, we do not see a good reason for eliminating the Monday before Election Day as an early vote day.

In summary, the OEC Action Fund does not support Sub. HB 458 because, while it takes a few steps forward, it makes many steps backward in enhancing the experience for Ohio voters. Instead of creating additional barriers, we should be implementing policies to make it easier for Ohioans to vote—policies such as:

- An automatic voter registration system, ensuring Ohioans are registered to vote every time they contact government vendors like the BMV
- A robust electronic absentee ballot application system that doesn't have additional barriers when compared to its paper counterpart
- A robust system of absentee ballot drop boxes scaled to the number of people living in a particular county
- Paid postage for absentee ballots to ensure cost and travel to a post office are never a factor in casting their ballot
- Expanded and enhanced early voting opportunities, including multiple early vote centers per county scaled to the number of people living in a particular county

Above all else, the OEC Action Fund urges this committee to remove the provisions that restrict the different types of IDs Ohioans can utilize when casting their vote. I remember, from my times working the polls in recent years, that a good number of voters will always show up with their utility statements or bank statements. For one reason or another, they didn't have another ID they could use—maybe they lost their driver's license recently. The reason doesn't particularly matter. While providing state-issued IDs to all Ohioans is a nice gesture, people will lose them. Or forget to get one. And limiting their right to vote because of such events will make it less likely that those eligible Ohioans cast their ballot.

In sum, the OEC Action Fund truly wishes it could support a bill truly designed to modernize our election system, creating new pathways for Ohioans to cast their votes each year. Instead, Sub. HB 458 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 458, 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 458, both in Committee and on the Senate floor.

Chair Gavarone 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,

Chris Tavenor  
Managing Director of Democracy Policy  
OEC Action Fund  
[ctavenor@theoec.org](mailto:ctavenor@theoec.org)