

Rev Joan VanBecelaere
Columbus, OH
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Chair Gavaronne, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath and members of the Local Government and Elections Committee,

I am Rev Joan VanBecelaere, a retired Unitarian Universalist minister. I'm here to ask you to vote against passage of substitute HB 458 as it now stands.

I have to ask right up front: why do we need this lengthy and confusing restructuring of our voting process in Ohio?

We know that Ohio does not have a massive election cheating problem. I read in the news that Secretary of State LaRose identified just 13 cases of non-citizens casting a ballot in the 2020 election.

13 cases out the 5.8 million people who voted in Ohio in 2020. These numbers are very small and attest to the effectiveness of the safeguards already in our state's voting procedures. Secretary LaRose said "Voter fraud is rare in Ohio," He said: "One of the reasons it's rare is because we have good laws on the books." And I agree. What we have **now** works.

So why are we considering new laws that will make it more difficult to vote for elderly folk, like myself, those who are homebound or in assisted living situations, those who are disabled or those living in rural communities? Why do we want ID laws that will make it more difficult for our young adults and college students to vote, including those who were born and raised in this state?

It hasn't been that long ago that I went through the hassle of getting the verified Ohio Compliant Driver's License. This bill would seem to require that I go through those hours and hours of waiting again just to get another new form of ID, even though I have been voting for many years. How many people, conservative or liberal, rural or urban, will be able to get this new ID before the next election? Will college recruiting materials now need to tell potential students who move from out of state will find it nearly impossible to register and vote?

Then, this bill takes what has been a steady and reliable schedule of early voting hours and makes it a confusing set of variable days and hours during the last week of early voting.

This bill also makes it more difficult to vote by mail-in-ballot, which has been a boon to people like me and my 80 year old spouse who can not stand long hours in line. And let's remember that not all polling places are accessible for those with mobility issues. In 2016, 83% of polling places examined by the Gov Accountability Office had at least one physical impediment to voting for disabled and elderly voters. How will it help election security to make it harder for the elderly, disabled and sick to vote?

Even if we mail our ballots in a week ahead of time, we would just have to pray that the post office delivers our ballots by election day: which, given the current delivery delays, is a huge gamble with our vote. Frankly, some of us like to hear the candidates' final debates before we vote. But that opportunity would be denied to us if we must mail our ballots in so much earlier to make sure they arrive in time.

And this bill limits the days, location and number of ballot drop boxes which only serves to make it harder for rural folk, those without transportation or unable to drive, and those working long hours or 2 jobs to drop off an absentee ballot early.

Some Ohio officials have talked about drop boxes as simply a "convenience" for voting. But increasing the accessibility of drop boxes is not a matter of making things convenient. It's a matter of making voting accessible so folk who **want** to vote are then **able** to vote. When talking about our rights, we are not talking about matters of convenience. We are talking about the right to accessibility.

This is not a matter of liberal or conservative or any particular party agenda. This is a matter of right and wrong. This is a matter of working to enable all Ohio citizens to participate in free and fair elections. In a democracy, this participation, this engagement in our process, is a sacred duty to be protected and promoted, not impeded and blocked. Senator Raphael Warnock said last week: "A vote is a kind of prayer for the world we desire for ourselves and our children."

In this age of post-pandemic confusion when our public life is being challenged on so many different fronts, the very least we can do is refrain from making it harder for citizens to engage in the democratic process. Please do not vote for this substitute bill HB 458. Please take time to consider carefully and ask voters what they need to ensure their ability to engage in our democracy.