



Ohio Environmental Council [Action Fund]

Opponent Testimony of Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund House Bill 680 - Mail Election (As Introduced) Presented to the House State & Local Government Committee June 3, 2020

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Stephens, Ranking Member Kelly, and Members of the House State & Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present opponent testimony of House Bill 680 (“HB680”). My name is Trent Dougherty, General Counsel for the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund.

The OEC Action Fund advocates for a renewable energy future, for clean air, safe drinking water, and for vibrant forests and accessible public lands not merely because we want good policy. We advocate to improve the lives of all who call Ohio home. This means not only advocating to protect our environment, but also to protect our fundamental rights.

Ohioans overwhelmingly want clean air, healthy public lands, safe drinking water and bold action on climate change. Guaranteeing all eligible Ohioans have the opportunity to make their voices heard through our elections ensures our policies reflect the will of the people. When more people vote, our environment wins and our communities win.

However, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Ohio’s elections has shown the blind-spots and barriers in our system—pitting safety against access to the ballot box. The haphazard 2020 Ohio Primary Election was chaotic for most, confusing for many, and unfortunately so difficult to maneuver for some, they just chose not to vote. The silver lining was that the Primary shined a light on the otherwise overlooked deficiencies in our absentee and mail voting process—giving lawmakers and policy officials the opportunity to fix those problems so every eligible Ohioan can safely and securely register to vote and cast their ballot in November and beyond.

Yet, instead of learning from those missteps, and fixing those deficiencies, HB 680 proposes to enshrine the very process deficiencies that kept too many eligible Ohioans from casting a ballot. HB680 is a giant step backward in making the right to vote easier and safer as we deal with a global pandemic that manifests itself in local crises. Therefore, **we urge a no vote on HB 680 because the bill:**

- Will either disenfranchise voters or put them at risk for contracting COVID-19 by forcing the administration to decide before Labor Day whether Ohioans need to vote mostly by mail on Election Day, not allowing for any change due to a potential spike in September or October.
- Sets an impossible standard for how the state could cancel in person voting due to public health concerns by legislative resolution, virtually guaranteeing boards of elections would not have the supplies on hand to conduct the election by mail.
- Would require Ohioans, if a mail election is ordered by the legislature, to vote early at a single location in each county until Friday, October 30 (removing the weekend early voting opportunities) or apply for their mail ballot by Saturday, October 24.

- Removes the state and local health departments' ability to set standards for the conduct of elections. That means health officials cannot set standards for adequate social distancing, cleaning and sanitizing, and the use of masks.
- Prohibits the Secretary of State from mailing unsolicited applications for absentee ballots to any electors for the November 2020 general election despite the fact that: (1) the state of Ohio sent out absentee ballot requests in every general election since 2012 and (2) this legislature already appropriated money to send absentee ballot requests in the biennial budget.

There are many common sense options we can put in place now to improve the safety, security, and accessibility of our election system in advance of November's general election and beyond. **Instead of the *As Introduced* version of HB680, Ohioans deserve true reforms. The legislature should:**

- **Allow multiple in-person early voting centers per county** so in-person voting can occur safely within the guidelines of physical distancing.
- **Fund Ohio's 88 county Boards of Elections sufficiently** to enable the education around and physical capacity for a vote-by-mail election.
- **Legally require county Boards of Elections to create yearly Election Administration Plans**, including details on emergency planning, public communications, voter education, allocation of resources such as poll workers and election machines, and public health protections.
- **Ensure accessibility of Ohio's vote-by-mail system** by allowing voters to request a vote-by-mail absentee ballot online, without needing to print and mail in an application. Additionally, allow voters to designate trusted individuals, in addition to immediate family members, to transport their absentee ballots. Allow voters to drop off absentee ballots at any polling location in their county on Election Day.

Thank you for considering our position and perspective.