



# OLBCF: BLACK PAPERS

## A Public Policy Brief

**Theme:** Voting Rights

**Bill/Policy:** “Revised Deadline to Return Absent Voter Ballot”, SB 293

**Status:** Passed

**Date:** February 2026 | **Lead:** Yassah Tommy

## THE QUICK CLIP

“Revised Deadline to Return Absent Voter Ballot”, SB 293, updates absentee ballot deadlines, revises provisional ballot rules, and enhances voter list maintenance. The bill removes the four-day grace period for absentee ballots, requiring them to arrive by Election Day to be counted. If a voter who requested an absentee ballot shows up at the polls, they must cast a provisional ballot, and only one ballot can be counted after verification. Additionally, the Secretary of State must conduct monthly citizenship verification checks for voters.

## THE STATE HOUSE BREAKDOWN

**Current Status:** Passed, will take into effect **March 20, 2026**

- **Voting Before Bill:** Previously, in Ohio, absentee ballots had a 4-day window for them to be received and counted as a vote. If a voter’s absentee ballot had not yet been received, they could appear at their polling place and cast a provisional ballot, which would only be counted if the absentee ballot was never received. Additionally, before this bill, the Secretary of State was only required to perform annual verification and maintenance of voter registration.<sup>1</sup>
- **Voting After Bill:** The bill now eliminates the four-day grace period for absentee ballots, enforces tighter restrictions on those requesting provisional ballots due to absentee ballots, requires the Secretary of State to conduct monthly citizenship verification checks, and allows poll workers to deny a voter if they cannot check their citizenship based on ID, requiring additional identification.<sup>2</sup>

**The "Why":** At the federal level, concerns about voting led to the proposed H.R. 22, the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act, which requires citizens to provide proof of U.S. citizenship, such as a birth certificate or passport, when voting in federal elections or mailing absentee ballots.<sup>3</sup> Sent to the Senate on April 10, 2025, the bill has not yet received a ruling but has sparked nationwide discussions and litigation in numerous states, including Ohio.

Sponsors Sen. Theresa Gavarone and Sen. Andrew Brenner introduced this bill following ongoing litigation in the Republican National Committee v. Wetzel case, where it was argued that Mississippi should eliminate its 5-day absentee ballot collection period. This has led many states to update their voting laws.<sup>4</sup> Sponsors also express concerns about voting fraud, and the bill aims to alleviate those worries and protect Ohioans' votes. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine emphasized the bill's importance, citing potential federal voting changes.<sup>5</sup>

## THE IMPACT ON OHIOANS

- **Economic and Social Stakes:** Tighter absentee ballot deadlines increase the risks of voter disenfranchisement by imposing structural barriers to voters who rely on mail voting, such as seniors, people with disabilities, workers, and those overseas.<sup>6</sup> Local election boards may face additional administrative and implementation costs, which ultimately affect taxpayers. These changes, overall, suppress voter turnout and erode public trust in the fairness and accessibility of Ohio’s election system.
- **The Disparity:** Of the 1.04 million eligible Black voters in Ohio, 603,000 did not vote, meaning only 42% participated.<sup>7</sup> This bill might further decrease that percentage. Measures such as extra precautions for poll workers, tighter deadlines for absentee ballots, and the possibility of removal for outdated registration, enforced by the Secretary of State, risk further deterring Black voters in Ohio.
- **Real-World Impacts:** As a working parent mailing your absentee ballot just before Election Day, you might assume it will arrive in time. However, with the new mailing system, your ballot could be sent to another state first and then forwarded to your local polling station, leading to delays and possibly arriving after Election Day, which means it won't be counted.<sup>8</sup> Also, if you find your photo ID has expired when visiting to vote, you can submit a provisional ballot, but you'll have less time to fix the issue. If unresolved, your vote won't count. Moreover, if you've moved and haven't updated your address, regular registration checks might flag your information early. This could result in showing up on Election Day and voting provisionally, but your vote might not be counted.

## ANALYSIS & REFLECTION

- **Proactive Shift:** Many believe that Ohio’s voting policies should have remained the same; they were flexible, reliable, and allowed citizens to be civically engaged, even if they had other responsibilities or could not vote in person. The concerns around voting presented by SB293 are reasonable; however, in the interest of all Ohioans, a few policies and rules should be adjusted. The four-day grace period should be reinstated, the 90-day limit on the secretary of state's voter registration checks should be enforced, and monthly checks are acceptable except during those three months. The voting process in Ohio can improve, but that improvement doesn't have to make voting harder for the population.

## DIRECT ACTION: THE PROACTIVE RESPONSE

As of February 2026, the League of Women Voters and CAIR-Northern Ohio have filed a federal lawsuit against SB 293 for violating the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) and the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause, stating “This new law puts eligible voters — particularly naturalized citizens — at risk of being purged from the voter rolls, without meaningful prior notice, even right up to Election Day.”<sup>9</sup>

- **Immediate Action:** Contact the sponsors of the bill, Sen. Theresa Gavarone and Sen. Andrew Brenner, and express your concerns about this bill. (Even though the bill has passed, you can still advocate for yourself and your community.)
- **Community Action:** Distribute this brief and the lawsuit to family, neighbors, and coworkers to spread this information.
- **Deep Dive:** Volunteer with or join voting advocacy groups in your city or consider starting one within your community.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Ohio General Assembly, *S.B. 293: As Introduced, Corrected Version, 136th General Assembly, Regular Session 2025–2026*, Senators Gavarone and Brenner, <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/136/sb293/documents>
- <sup>2</sup> Ohio Legislative Service Commission, *S.B. 293: 136th General Assembly — Bill Analysis, Version as Reported by House General Government*, Office of Research and Drafting, Legislative Budget Office, Emily E. Wendel, attorney, <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/download?key=26724>
- <sup>3</sup> Grace Panetta, “How the *Save America Act* Would Make Major Changes to Voting,” *PBS NewsHour*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/how-the-save-america-act-would-make-major-changes-to-voting>
- <sup>4</sup> Ohio General Assembly, *Senators Theresa Gavarone and Andrew Brenner, Sponsor Testimony: Senate Bill 293, 136th General Assembly*, <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/136/sb293/committee>
- <sup>5</sup> Cody Schwein, “DeWine Reluctantly Signs Bill Cutting Grace Period for Mailed Absentee Ballots in Ohio,” *The State News*, December 20, 2025, <https://www.statenews.org/government-politics/2025-12-20/dewine-reluctantly-signs-bill-cutting-grace-period-for-mailed-absentee-ballots-in-ohio>
- <sup>6</sup> States United Democracy Center, “Nearly 1 in 3 Americans Voted by Mail in 2024,” *States United Democracy Center*, September 4, 2025, <https://statesunited.org/resources/americans-vote-by-mail-2024>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ohio Legislative Black Caucus Foundation, *2025 Pilot: State of Black Ohio: Voters’ Voice — Insights from Cleveland’s Central Neighborhood & Statewide Survey Launch*, 13, <https://www.olbcfoundation.org/files/ugd/1c834bdcb15b7e03b9422b861d13c641905a22.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Elena Patel, “*When a Postmark No Longer Tracks Mailing*,” *Brookings Institution*, December 30, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/when-a-postmark-no-longer-tracks-mailing>
- <sup>9</sup> League of Women Voters, “Voting Rights Groups Sue to Protect Ohio Voters from Illegal Purges,” February 13, 2026, <https://www.lwv.org/newsroom/press-releases/voting-rights-groups-sue-protect-ohio-voters-illegal-purges-0>