May 11, 2020
Sent Electronically

To Governor Mike DeWine, Secretary of State Frank LaRose, Speaker Larry Householder, Minority Leader Emilia Sykes, Senate President Larry Obhof, and Minority Leader Kenny Yuko
Re: A Safe, Accessible, and Secure November Election

President Abraham Lincoln insisted on maintaining the 1864 election amidst the Civil War, observing: "We cannot have free government without elections; and if the rebellion could force us to forego, or postpone a national election it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us." We stand now at a similar juncture, even as Ohio shows progress in fighting the pandemic of COVID-19. It is unlikely that we will defeat the virus by fall, but we cannot let it defeat our democracy.

The Ohio primary saw just 22.6% of registered voters able to take part, the lowest-ever spring turnout for a presidential election. While the events of March unfolded quickly, the nation's top scientists are telling us now that the virus will likely recur in dangerous waves across the fall, a warning we should heed and a head start of several months that we should use to craft a contingency plan. "Fool me twice, shame on me," goes the adage.

The U.S. Constitution fixes the date of the election, so we only have one chance to get this right. Ohio must learn the lessons of Wisconsin, where last-minute measures sent citizens who never received their ballots by mail to wait for hours in line, only for dozens to subsequently develop confirmed cases of coronavirus. No American should have to choose between their right to vote and their health.

As elected leaders, our duty is to enable every citizen of Ohio – young or old, rich or poor, black or white, in urban, suburban, or rural areas that span the shores of Lake Erie to the Ohio River – a chance to exercise their right to vote.

In 2016, 64% of Ohioans voted on Election Day at polling places, 22% voted early by mail, and 12% voted early in-person at county boards of elections[1]. The solution for the fall of 2020 is clear. **To ensure that Election Day polling places are less congested and can conform to social distancing and sanitization standards, we must at least double the number of Ohioans who opt for safe, accessible, and secure early voting options.**

<u>Protect and Preserve In-Person Voting</u>

- **Fund county boards of elections to open an additional early vote center per 75,000 citizens, with expanded weekend hours.** To double early in-person voting across October is to ask the 12 counties that in 2016 constituted 52% of all in-person early voting[2] to process at least an additional 350,000 voters in the same cramped facilities, while somehow also maintaining social distancing and sanitization standards that would already force them to cut capacity by 75%. *No serious plan for a safe vote this fall can omit this provision.*
- **Expand curbside voting and allow drive-up and drop-off options for mail ballots at both early vote centers and Election Day polling locations.**

[1] https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/Ohio_-_EAVS_2016_Data_Brief_-_508.pdf Note these do not add up to 100% because of provisional ballots and military and overseas ballots.
[2] https://www.sos.state.oh.us/globalassets/elections/2016/gen/absenteesupplemental.xlsx Those 12 counties are Butler, Cuyahoga, Delaware, Franklin, Hamilton, Lorain, Lucas, Medina, Montgomery, Stark, Summit, and Warren.

- **Make voting safe**: avoid use of any polling site where at-risk populations gather, like churches or senior residences; adopt sanitization practices and socially-distanced line management; recruit young people to serve as poll workers; and require masks.

Secure and Expand Early Vote By Mail

- **Include paid return postage for every absentee application and ballot.** Not providing pre-paid return postage is patently unconstitutional and will result in litigation, confusion and delays.
- **The Secretary of State should allow voters to request an absentee ballot online**, which is within the office's existing authority despite claims to the contrary.
- **Implement the following reforms that for too long have caused Ohioans' duly-cast votes to be rejected:**
    - Stop asking untrained volunteers to play handwriting expert. Unscientific signature matching protocols disproportionately disenfranchise seniors, young voters, and people with disabilities. Instead, train staff on appropriate signature verification methods.
    - Count ballots postmarked by Election Day. Count ballots lacking any postmark received by mail by the third day after the election.
    - Eliminate all of the following as a reason to reject a mailed ballot: torn or removed perforated ballot stubs, overly prescriptive ballot return envelope requirements, and minor information errors such as transposed numbers and substituting the current year for birth year.
- **Allow community organizations, labor unions, and trusted helpers to deliver sealed ballots**, rather than the current list of only certain family members that excludes grandchildren, cousins, roommates, and friends.

Enhance Voter Registration Access

Ohio has the most restrictive voter registration deadline permitted under U.S. law and has purged more voters from its rolls than any other state. The suspension of routine Bureau of Motor Vehicles transactions until December – which originate more than one-third of all voter registration activity in Ohio under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) or "Motor Voter" law – will further depress registrations. Without reform, Ohio turnout will fall to embarrassing new lows, already now in the bottom half of all states.

- **Shift the voter registration deadline closer to or on Election Day.**
- **Streamline the online voter registration form** to match what is required for a paper voter registration form – that is, require either SSN4 or driver's license/state ID number, but not both.
- **The Secretary of State should exhaust existing powers to help more Ohioans register to vote**: reinstating purged voters who are still eligible to vote in Ohio; implementing automatic voter registration administratively; and expanding the social service agency transactions that trigger the simultaneous registration opportunity under the NVRA, including unemployment benefits.

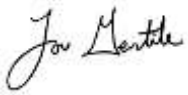
When COVID-19 reached the U.S, Ohio did not "wait and see"; we pulled together and took farsighted and aggressive actions that saved lives. We call on you now to adopt a similarly proactive approach to give county boards of elections the time they need to rapidly scale up supplies, technology, and systems and to educate Ohio voters on new processes. As President Lincoln once observed: "You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

Sincerely,
Ohio Democratic leaders

Kristin Boggs
Ohio House Assistant Minority Leader and State Representative (HD 18)

Luke Feeney
Mayor of Chillicothe

Kevin Boyce
Franklin County Commissioner



Lou Gentile
Former State Senator (SD 30)

Elizabeth Brown
Columbus City Council President Pro Tem

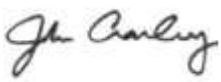
Andy Ginther
Mayor of Columbus

Shontel Brown
Cuyahoga County Councilmember

Blaine Griffin
Cleveland City Councilmember

Kathleen Clyde
Portage County Commissioner

Shannon Hardin
Columbus City Council President



John Cranley
Mayor of Cincinnati

Stephanie Howse
State Representative (HD 11) and President of the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus

Brad Cromes
Portage County Treasurer

Wade Kapszukiewicz
Mayor of Toledo

Brigid Kelly
State Representative (HD 31)

Aftab Pureval
Hamilton County Clerk of Courts

Megan Kilgore
Columbus City Auditor

P.G. Sittenfeld
Cincinnati City Councilmember

Zach Klein
Columbus City Attorney

Elizabeth Walters
Summit County Councilmember

Danny O'Connor
Franklin County Recorder

Nan Whaley
Mayor of Dayton