

Feb. 15, 2023

SB 209

Opponent

Chloe Chaffin

Private Citizen, Resident of Topeka

Thank you, Chair Thompson and members of the committee for the opportunity to share my testimony here today. I am a Topekan living in House District 55, Senate District 19.

I am writing to you now to ask that you vote in strong opposition of SB 209 and preserve the three days grace period for absentee ballot returns.

I am a student in my junior year at Washburn University and thus started college at the peak of the pandemic in the Fall of 2020. I'm originally from Olathe and was still registered there until last year, so my first handful of ballots were all mailed absentee from campus. Living in the dorms, I quite often found that the student-run mail room could be rather slow in getting mail in or out to its final destination. It was not because the workers did not work hard, but because 400 people lived in our building, got sent first to the wrong dorm, or just because the part-time student employees were taking the day off to cram for midterms. I would get an email from Amazon that a package was delivered and not see it in my mailbox for another three days. I maintained pen-pal relationships with many of my friends starting college elsewhere across the country and noticed that outgoing mail sent from my dorm in August also took much longer to reach them than it had when I was sending it from my parent's house in July.

Also of concern to students, many universities charge exorbitant fees for parking permits which push some students not to bring a car onto campus, assuming they can even afford a car to begin with.

Mix in heavy courseloads, campus involvement, the need to work part-time, and the pressure to take on unpaid internships, and suddenly it can be quite hard for these youngest voters to make it off campus to vote should this bill make them feel that absentee voting is no longer a viable option.

If mailroom log jams were a problem for me, then I worry for every other student living on campuses all across the state. There are thousands of first-time voters who may submit their ballots on time but who would not have had their votes counted without the grace period, not because they are fraudulent, but because they are trying to navigate the first few months of university. No one should be punished for trying to make something of themselves in this way. More needs to be done to court first-time voters. Building long-term pro-democracy societies mean that we need to give extra thought to first-time voters so that they have a positive experience.

When young people tell us that they already find elections overwhelming, that they don't think their votes count, we should be wary not to prove their point. Harm is already being done here. Just seeing this debate year after year adds to the confusion these students must navigate. Let this be the year we put this to bed. Let this be the year we change course.

Thank you for your time. Please vote in opposition to SB 209.