



June 3, 2019
The Honorable Senator Ginny Burdick, Chair
Senate Committee on Rules, Members
Re: Testimony in Support of HB 3310

Chair Burdick, Members of the Committee,

My name is Colin Cole, and I'm the Policy Director for More Equitable Democracy Action. I'm writing to you today in support of HB 3310, the Oregon Voting Rights Act.

If enacted, the OVRA would essentially do two things. First and foremost, it would codify the federal Voting Rights Act into state law for Oregon's school districts, education service districts, and community colleges. Litigation under the federal law is time-consuming and costly for both plaintiffs and defendants; the OVRA makes navigating these challenges much easier for all parties involved. Instead of necessitating lengthy, expensive federal lawsuits, the OVRA provides a streamlined process that empowers local governments and the communities they represent the ability to ensure that every voter has an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

Secondly, the OVRA actually strengthens voting rights above and beyond the federal VRA. Though a landmark piece of legislation, the VRA is not a voting rights panacea. In order to qualify for relief under the VRA, jurisdictions must have communities of color "*sufficiently large and geographically compact to constitute a majority in a single-member district.*" That is, part of the jurisdiction needs to be majority people of color in order to qualify for voting rights protections. If communities of color are sufficiently large and vote cohesively but are spread throughout a jurisdiction rather than concentrated in one part of it, the federal voting rights act offers no protections. In other words, perversely, the federal Voting Rights Act requires segregation.

There is no such requirement under the OVRA. The OVRA creates robust tools to ensure the voting rights of Oregonians are protected even in places that aren't heavily segregated. If we are serious about building a desegregated society, this is perhaps the most compelling reason to support it. At present, there aren't really other options to protect voting rights in these communities. Even if a local government is completely sympathetic and wants all votes to have equal weight, existing state law does not allow them much flexibility, if any, for changing their voting method to one that is equitable, fair, and tailored to the needs of a local community.

Democracy is at its best when every citizen's voice has equal weight, and the OVRA can help advance that ideal. By recognizing the voting rights of all citizens, regardless of the neighborhoods they live in, you can ensure elected officials are actually representative of the communities they are supposed to represent. By passing the OVRA, you can empower local people and governments to work together and find community-driven solutions.

For these reasons, I strongly urge Oregon to join Washington and California in establishing a state-based Voting Rights Act. Please vote "yes" on HB 3310. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Colin Cole, Policy Director
More Equitable Democracy Action