



The League of Women Voters of Oregon is a 101-year-old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We envision informed Oregonians participating in a fully accessible, responsive, and transparent government to achieve the common good. LWVOR Legislative Action is based on advocacy positions formed through studies and member consensus. The League never supports or opposes any candidate or political party.

February 24, 2021

To: [Senate Committee on Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation](#)
Senator Floyd Prozanski, Chair

Re: [SB 571](#) – Extending voting rights to incarcerated citizens – **Support**

A core principle of the League of Women Voters is the belief that voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed. This principle was central to our mission at our founding 100 years ago and remains so to this day. We strongly support SB 571, which extends voting rights to a group of individuals who have historically been disenfranchised in this country—incarcerated citizens. There are those who might argue that convicted felons deserve to be stripped of this basic right, but when one considers the inequities long embedded in our criminal justice system, it becomes clear it is time to restore this basic right of citizenship.

First, it is important to point out that laws governing a felon’s right to vote vary widely from state to state. A hodgepodge of felony disenfranchisement laws currently exists, generally falling into four main categories: 2 states and Washington, D.C. allow incarcerated individuals to vote, 19 states restore the right upon release (including Oregon), one state restores the right after prison and parole, 19 states restore the right after prison, parole, and probation, and 9 states ban certain felons from voting for life. In recent years there have been efforts in several states to lift restrictions on felon voting, and I’m proud to say the League has played a key role. Passage of SB 571 would be a major step forward, enabling Oregon to join Maine, Vermont, and D.C. in allowing persons convicted of a felony to register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in elections while incarcerated. This would enfranchise over 15,000 citizens currently incarcerated in Oregon. It would also pave the way for other states to consider this step, and hopefully one day allow the US to be included among the 16 democratic countries that allow incarcerated felons to vote, including our neighbor to the north, Canada.

Secondly, we believe that SB 571 is a long-awaited acknowledgement of the real reasons these disenfranchisement laws were originally put in place. Two hundred years ago, only Connecticut barred citizens with criminal convictions from voting. By the start of the Civil War, 17 states had followed, and once slavery was abolished ten more states quickly joined them, mostly in the South. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in the incarceration of African Americans males, even for minor offenses. Thus, our criminal justice system developed into quite a useful tool for disenfranchisement and disempowerment for African Americans. It is gratifying to see the many bills this session that emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion, and we urge you to view SB 571 as one of the most important.

Lastly, we urge passage of this bill because our laws need to better reflect this 1996 amendment to the Oregon Constitution: "Laws for the punishment of crimes shall be founded on these principles: protection of society, personal responsibility, accountability for one’s actions and reformation." The League believes that the denial of the right to vote does nothing to further the amendment’s goals and that our laws should reflect twenty-first century thinking about criminal justice. We know that the civic engagement model of reentry, one that involves community through service and restorative justice, works far better than forcing inmates to undergo “civil death.” Several years ago, I taught a class in civic engagement to a group of women inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Institution, and I can assure you that they were hungry for knowledge about how our government works and how they could have a voice in their futures. The right to vote would have certainly given them a way to feel connected to the outside world.

In keeping with the League's redistricting position, we are happy to see that for the purpose of voter registration this bill specifies a person's residence as the place where the person resided prior to incarceration and not the correctional facility.

The League urges passage of SB 571, and we thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation.



Rebecca Gladstone
LWVOR President



Marge Easley
LWVOR Voting Rights Portfolio