

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee. For the record, my name is Andrea Salinas, State Representative for House District 38, Southwest Portland and Lake Oswego.

I am here today to urge your support for SB 571, which will restore the right to vote to Oregonians incarcerated in state prisons and make our democracy more whole.

Through innovative policies like universal vote by mail, automatic voter registration, and pre-paid postage for returned ballots, Oregon has taken positive steps to ensure maximum participation in democracy. As a result, Oregon consistently ranks among the states with the highest voter turnout, and acts as a leader in guaranteeing access to the ballot.

While these successes should be celebrated, we cannot claim to be a model of true, representative democracy, when we continue to deny the right to vote to incarcerated Oregonians.

For a democracy to be truly representative, all Oregonians, whether they live in an apartment in Downtown Portland, a farm in Eastern Oregon, or a prison in Salem, must be able to have a say in the policies that influence their lives, and be able to hold the elected officials who make decisions on their behalf accountable for their actions. As an example, when the Oregon legislature considered closing two prisons last year, the Oregonians who would have been impacted the most were absent from the discussion.

Ninety-five percent of Oregonians return to their communities after they complete their sentences. By depriving Oregonians in prison of this critical opportunity for civic engagement, we are further alienating them from society, and preventing them from maintaining the community ties that are so crucial to success after their release.

Lastly, we must consider how the disproportionate rates of incarceration cause Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and young people to be disenfranchised at a much higher rate. For example, Black people make up only two point five percent of Oregon's population, but make up nine percent of those incarcerated.

Since June, Oregonians have called on us to reimagine our criminal justice system, confront these kinds of systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect BIPOC Communities, and to chart a more equitable path forward. Restoring the right to vote is part of that reimagining, and is also part of the work to recognize and confront how Oregon's history of racism has shaped the state's policies and institutions.

In restoring the right to vote to incarcerated Oregonians, we can work to better our democracy, center racial justice, and dismantle structures of white supremacy that disproportionately impact BIPOC Communities. This kind of policy exemplifies the systemic changes that Oregonians are calling for, and embodies the democratic principles that are central to the core values of our state.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of SB 571.