

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary
From: Alexander Coven, Attorney
Date: January 25, 2023

RE: Support Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary,

My name is Alexander Coven and I am a resident of Portland, Oregon. I am writing to testify in strong support for Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579, which will ensure every eligible Oregonian can register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in elections based on where they resided prior to incarceration.

The right to vote is enshrined in our constitution and fundamental to a vibrant and participatory democracy. Yet, around 12,000 people in Oregon are currently denied their right to vote, leading to the disproportionate disenfranchisement of low-income, Black, Indigenous, and Latine people. Guaranteeing the Right to Vote fulfills the promise of our democracy while improving public safety, and addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities.

For nine years I have worked closely with people navigating the criminal legal system—first as a public defender in New Jersey and Oregon, and more recently providing legal assistance to woman incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon. From my experience, the factor that best predicts successful reentry in the community is civic engagement. Study after study has shown that being engaged and active in the community reduces the risk of recidivism.

Voting is a civic right and responsibility that cannot and should not be taken away from any citizen, regardless of criminal history. Laws that disenfranchise those with criminal convictions are a shameful byproduct of racism and white supremacy in our country. Supporting this bill is a step in the right direction for addressing the biases and inequities of our criminal legal system.

I am not alone in my support for this important bill. This legislation is supported by over 40 civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, as well as dozens of currently and formerly incarcerated people. Please ensure that Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579, is passed out of committee.

Thank you,

Alexander Coven