

RE: Support Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579
Senate Committee on Judiciary

January 26, 2023

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

My name is Carleene Houk and I live in Portland. 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 Latinx people. Guaranteeing the Right to Vote fulfills the promise of our democracy while improving public safety, and addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities.

I have worked with populations impacted by incarceration since 2018, and I believe that civic engagement can eliminate one aspect of the “othering” that occurs when a person is convicted of a crime. I support this bill because I believe that electoral politics are only truly democratic if we guarantee that all Oregonians have the right to vote, regardless of their history. In a state that polices and prosecutes people of color and poor people at disproportionate rates, we are effectively cutting off large swaths of people from being able to participate in civic processes. Even though Oregon has restored voting rights for people with felony convictions, there are barriers to them registering and the rules are complex, which can lead to people being penalized for even attempting to make their voices heard.

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,

Carleene Houk