

1/26/23

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

My name is Justice Rajee and I am with Reimagine Oregon. Reimagine Oregon is an accountability project led by Black leaders to begin the end of systemic racism in Oregon. We are part of a broad coalition that has the support of over 40 civil rights organizations, faith-based groups, as well as dozens of currently and formerly incarcerated people. 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 low-income, Black, Indigenous, and Latine people being disproportionately disenfranchised.

This legislation is important to Reimagine Oregon. It is essential that Oregonians that are incarcerated have clarity about their pathway to return and reconcile with the community. The ability to stay engaged and have agency in our civic process is a vital component of that process. This bill allows Oregonians that are incarcerated to participate and engage in the community they will return to, so all voices have a hand in our collective future.

More than 95% of incarcerated people will re-enter society after completing their sentence and work jobs, raise families, and pay taxes in their communities. Making sure Oregonians can vote while incarcerated allows them to feel involved in their communities, and increases the success of reintegration when they come back. Voting also allows incarcerated people to advocate for their children and loved ones who remain in their communities. Mass incarceration damages our communities. It divides families, harms children, and diverts resources away from other community needs. To reverse that harm, we need to keep people from re-entering the criminal legal system. We know that civic engagement reduces the likelihood that someone returns to prison again because they feel connected to their community. By restoring voting rights to incarcerated people, we reduce recidivism and make our society stronger.

Voting is a right that cannot and should not be taken away from any citizen of the U.S. No matter your race, area code, or income, every Oregonian should have an equal say in what happens in our country and our community. Denying Oregonians the ability to vote not only denies them a right, but it denies them the ability to fulfill their civic responsibility to our democracy. Oregon is a leader in protecting and expanding voting rights through initiatives like universal vote by mail, automatic voter registration, paid postage, postmarked ballots on elections day, and pre-registration for 16-17-year-olds. This is because Oregon's legislators have recognized that voting is a civic right and responsibility.

Due to biases and inequities in our criminal legal system, low-income, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are more likely to be incarcerated. For many people, life after prison only means partial citizenship, as formerly incarcerated people often experience limited opportunities for employment, housing, and voting. As we work to reimagine our criminal legal system, one of the first changes we can make is to restore voting rights to people who are most impacted by that system, those inside prisons.

Legislation is best shaped by directly impacted people - Guaranteeing the Right to Vote emerged from community conversations with currently and formerly incarcerated people about the importance of voting and civic responsibility. Currently, Maine, Vermont, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico allow people in prison to vote. Over 20 states are considering making this change, and Oregon can lead the way.

Guaranteeing the Right to Vote fulfills the promise of our democracy while improving public safety, and addressing racial and socioeconomic inequities. As a representative of Reimagine Oregon, we ask that you please support SB 579 and pass it out of committee.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justice Rajee', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Justice Rajee
he/him
Director
Reimagine Oregon