

Date: February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023  
To: House Committee on Rules  
From: Stephanie Phillips Bridges, Policy Analyst for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Support for Expanding Voting Access at Primary Elections, HB 2694

Chair Fahey, Vice-Chairs Breese-Iverson and Kropf, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2694, which seeks to expand the right to vote in primaries for youth who can also vote in general elections. My name is Stephanie Phillips Bridges, and I am a Policy Analyst with the Urban League of Portland. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and Southwest Washington.

In its most recent State of Black America publication, "Under Siege: The Plot to Destroy Democracy," the National Urban League opens the report with setting the context of where democracy is under siege in the United States. In 1976, the first report "captured the plight of a people who had been victims of systemic racism since arriving on the shores of this nation. More than a century after enslaved people were freed at the end of the civil war, the political leadership in this country had failed to help Black Americans secure equal rights entitled to all Americans. Politicians, including the President, had also failed to adequately capture and address the systemic barriers to equitable employment, health, housing, education, social justice, civic participation, and economic opportunity. Out of this, the State of Black America was born."<sup>1</sup> We are again raising the alarm about the outlook for Black and Brown people; political forces have launched an all-out assault on voting rights that disproportionately affects the communities that we serve. Democracy works best when everyone's voice has the opportunity to be heard; this is especially important for our young Oregonians who are just about to transition into adulthood, where access to the voting rights will lay the foundation for them to be civically engaged.

However, based on the current structure of Oregon's laws, young adults who would turn 18 years of age in time for the general election date, but are only 17 years of age at the time of the primary election, are prevented from voting in the primary election. That is, a 17 year old with a birthday between May and early November, who is expecting to legally participate in a November general election, cannot legally participate in a May primary election, despite the clear importance of primary elections determining which candidates arrive on the general election ballot. According to the census, "this could be nearly 20,000 eligible voters who are prevented from making their voices heard during a pivotal part of the same election cycle."<sup>2</sup> Partial inclusion for otherwise eligible electors during the same election cycle is antithetical to Oregon's values. "In fact, due to Oregon's progressive policies like universal vote by mail and automatic voter

---

<sup>1</sup> National Urban League, State of Black America: Under Siege – The Plot to Destroy Democracy, 2022, pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts Oregon, 2022.

registration, Oregon had the highest voter turnout during the 2022 election cycle among all 50 states.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Oregon is a leader in protecting and expanding voting rights through measures like universal vote by mail, automatic voter registration, paid postage, postmarked ballots on elections day, and other similar measures. By reducing barriers to voter registration, “Oregon now has over 3 million registered voters;”<sup>4</sup> or context, “prior to the inception of our motor voter process in 2016, Oregon had less than 2.2 million registered voters.”<sup>5</sup> By reducing unnecessary barriers to civic participation, in the span of seven years, Oregon registered 900,000 more voters. Expansion of this right should be encouraged and hastily accepted. Moreover, “among communities of color, voters in the Black community sustained the highest rate of voter turnout.”<sup>6</sup> Allowing young Black voters to fully participate in an election cycle will continue this mantra of civic participation by allowing young adults the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Please support passage of HB 2694. If we chose to do nothing then thousands of Oregonians will continue to be disenfranchised; at a time when democracy is under attack on various fronts, Oregon should be doing what it can to shore it up. Oregon’s youth are counting on you to foster inclusion, commit to racial equality, and strengthen democracy by expanding voter access.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephanie Phillips Bridges', written in a cursive style.

Stephanie Phillips Bridges  
Policy Analyst  
Urban League of Portland  
Portland, OR 97227  
Phone: 503.740.2607  
Fax: 503.281.2612

---

<sup>3</sup> OPB, Oregon had the Nation’s Highest Turnout Rate in the November 2022 Election, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Oregon Secretary of State- Elections Division, Voter Registration Comparison by County, 2022, pg. 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Oregon Capitol Chronicle, Oregonians Face Low Barriers to Voting, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> PEW Research Center, Historic Highs in 2018 Voter Turnout Extended Across Racial and Ethnic Groups, 2019.