

April 16th, 2019

Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee:

I am a third year sociology student at Willamette University and have been working for a year to bring this change forward to the Oregon legislature. I am deeply committed to social justice and the goal of fair representation for all communities. I am writing to express my support of HB 2492 to end prison gerrymandering in Oregon, a practice that is directly impeding fair representation.

The Census counts residents living in prisons in a whole group and uses those numbers for redistricting, even though most people are incarcerated for less than three years of the 10 year Census cycle.

Over 40% of the prison population is in rural, white areas, but these incarcerated people are largely black and Latinx and often from urban centers of Oregon. People of color are disproportionately incarcerated and relocated to areas that do not represent them and they cannot vote, which artificially inflates areas around prisons. This is a transfer of political power from urban centers that have a 56% minority population to rural communities that are 79% white.

There are many specific examples of what this looks like for Oregon residents from the city hall level all the way to the state legislature. Oregonians in the Southeast of the state have more voting power than most other areas because of the Snake River Correctional Facility. Because house districts are approximately 63,000 people and Snake River is home to about 3,000 incarcerated people, the 60,000 voting residents of HD 60 (encompassing Baker, Grant, Harney, Malheur, and parts of Lake county) have the same amount of political power as 63,000 in Eugene HD 13.

Local elections are also impacted by this practice. After districting lines were drawn with 2010 Census data, Pendleton had a city council ward that is 28% prisoners, making it so people living near the prison had significantly more political power than those who did not. After the 2000 Census, Salem had 2 wards that were made up of 12% incarcerated people.

This is an urgent issue, as the 2019 legislative session is the last chance that we are able to rectify this injustice before the 2020 Census begins and district lines are drawn, affecting Oregon's population for the next 10 years. I urge you all to support HB 2492 and take the next step toward granting Oregonians equal political representation.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,
Malea Kirkland
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