
Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon

March 9, 2021

Chair Smith Warner, Vice-Chairs Holvey and Drazen, and Members of the House Committee on Rules,

Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon has made access to democracy a top priority. Reproductive freedom and health care are often attacked at the ballot box and unfairly politicized, so we advocate for policies that ensure everyone can vote to defend their bodily autonomy and access to health care. We respectfully request the committee's support of House Bill 2366.

Civic participation is the bedrock of any democracy. To facilitate full and robust voter engagement in our elections, we need to decrease barriers and expand access to safe and secure voting. From automatic voter registration to paid postage for ballots, Oregon has long been a vanguard and national leader in improving access to the ballot. By restoring voting rights to incarcerated Oregonians, House Bill 2366 can take a historic step toward eliminating laws created in the Jim Crow era that are rooted in white supremacy and have no correlation to public safety.

Almost everyone in prison will one day return to their communities. Re-entry can be a difficult process, but having strong ties to the community increases the chances of success. Civic engagement, specifically voting, increases the ability for reintegration, reducing recidivism and making communities safer.

Additionally, the lives of people in prison and the lives of their families on the outside are influenced by policies made by elected officials. About 75% of women in Oregon prisons are mothers. The number of women imprisoned in the Oregon Department of Corrections has nearly tripled over the past 20 years even though women are not committing more frequent or serious crimes.¹ One driver of these increased rates of incarceration is changes in sentencing laws, related to certain drug and property crimes, which have disproportionately impacted women of color.²

Justice-involved women have often experienced childhood victimization, family violence, unhealthy relationships, unsafe housing, and are of low socioeconomic status.³ Depriving these women of a voice in the electoral process further reinforces these cycles of structural discrimination and marginalization. People in prison should be able to influence the electoral process and hold elected officials accountable for the decisions that directly impact them and their families.

The right to vote is only taken away from Oregonians while they are incarcerated in a state prison. The removal of voting rights should not be connected to punishment. The removal of voting rights is civic death and an affront to civil liberties — particularly for Black, Latinx and young people who are disenfranchised at much higher rates because of disproportionate incarceration resulting from racist and discriminatory public policies.

At a time when misinformation about election fraud abounds and the votes of Black, Indigenous and People of Color have been actively suppressed in other states, Oregon can lead by expanding access to the vote and restoring voting rights to nearly 15,000 Oregonians in prison. Maine, Vermont and the District of Columbia allow incarcerated people to vote. More than 20 states are considering making this change, and Oregon can build upon our status as a national leader in voting access. Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon urges your support of House Bill 2366.

Sincerely,

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Interim Executive Director
Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon

¹ <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/crime/2017/02/16/oregon-faces-skyrocketing-female-prison-population/98012786/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.