



The League of Women Voters of Oregon is a 103-year-old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We envision informed Oregonians participating in a fully accessible, responsive, and transparent government to achieve the common good. LWVOR Legislative Action is based on advocacy positions formed through studies and member consensus. The League never supports or opposes any candidate or political party.

January 26, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Judiciary
Senator Floyd Prozanski, Chair

Re: [SB 579](#) – Extending voting rights to incarcerated citizens – **Support**

A core principle of the League of Women Voters is the belief that voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed. This principle was central to our mission at our founding 103 years ago and remains so to this day. We strongly support SB 579, which restores voting rights to a group of individuals who have historically been disenfranchised in this country—incarcerated citizens. We provide the following rationale for our position:

- It is time to acknowledge the reasons disenfranchisement laws were originally put in place in Oregon and across the US. Two hundred years ago, only Connecticut barred citizens with criminal convictions from voting. By the start of the Civil War, 17 states had followed, and once slavery was abolished ten more states quickly joined them, mostly in the South. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in the incarceration of African Americans males, even for minor offenses. Thus, our criminal justice system developed into quite a useful tool for disempowerment of African Americans and remains so to this day. SB 579 does not extend a new right but represents the “restoration” of a right that was taken away for racist purposes.
- A range of voting laws regarding incarcerated individuals currently exists across the US, generally falling into four main categories: those that allow incarcerated individuals to vote, those that restore the right upon release, those that restore the right after a period of parole and/or probation, and those that ban certain felons from voting for life. In recent years there has been a concerted effort in many states to lift restrictions on felon voting, and I’m proud to say the League has played a key role. Passage of SB 579 would enable Oregon to join Maine, Vermont, Puerto Rico, and D.C. in allowing persons convicted of a felony to register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in elections while incarcerated. This would enfranchise over 13,000 citizens currently incarcerated in Oregon. It would also pave the way for other states to consider this step and hopefully one day allow the US to be included among the 16 democratic countries that allow incarcerated felons to vote, including our neighbor to the north—Canada.
- Lastly, we urge passage of this bill because our laws need to better reflect a 1996 amendment to the Oregon Constitution, stating: "Laws for the punishment of crimes shall be founded on these principles: protection of society, personal responsibility, accountability for one’s actions and reformation." The League believes that our laws should reflect twenty-first century thinking about criminal justice. We know that the civic engagement model of reentry, one that involves community through service and restorative justice, works far better than forcing inmates to undergo “civic death.”

In keeping with the League's redistricting position, we support the bill's provision that for the purpose of voter registration, a person's residence is the place where the person resided prior to incarceration and not the correctional facility.

The League urges passage of SB 579, and we thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation.



Rebecca Gladstone
LWVOR President



Marge Easley
LWVOR Action Committee