

# Guaranteeing the Right to Vote Testimony

RE: Support Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579  
Senate Committee on Judiciary

**January 26, 2023**

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

My name is **ShaToyia Bentley** and I am with **The Ebony Collective Coalition. We are a culturally specific organization that strives to protect African American communities in Oregon quality of health, education and economics by ensuring equity in all levels.** 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.

**Voting is a civil right — the cornerstone of our democracy and the fundamental right upon which all our civil liberties rest.**

- 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.
- Our constitution guarantees free elections, equal protection under the law, and freedom of speech. Voting is also fundamental to our rights and freedom as Oregonians. Everyone, including people who are incarcerated, should have access to the ballot box so they can have a say in the decisions that impact their lives.
- 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.

**Because of mass incarceration, low income, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are disproportionately denied the right to vote.**

- 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.
- Blocking people with felony convictions from voting started in the Jim Crow era as an intentional strategy to keep Black people from voting because they are disproportionately impacted by the biased criminal legal system. In Oregon, 9% of incarcerated people are Black, despite Black people accounting for only 2% of the state’s residents.<sup>1</sup> Guaranteeing the right to vote, including those who are or have been incarcerated, ensures all people have a voice in our democracy.
- People in prison face issues unique to their incarceration that often go unaddressed by public officials. COVID-19 illustrated the unique issues that people in prison can face. In October, The Oregonian reported that COVID-19 cases were 10 times higher in Oregon prisons than in the state broadly.

**Guaranteeing the Right to Vote is a simple and effective solution.**

- 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 **The Ebony Collective Coalition**, we ask that you please support SB 579 and pass it out of committee.

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Thank you,

**ShaToyia Bentley**  
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**Executive Director**  
**The Ebony Collective Coalition**