

Members of the committee,

My name is Theo Spain and I live in Portland. I'm here today to testify in strong support for funding SB579, Guaranteeing the Right to Vote.

In a real representative democracy, the right to vote should not be a privilege. The right to participate as citizens in our government is a basic civil liberty, and should never be a prize that can be won or lost based on behavior and circumstance.

I was born and raised in Oregon, and I love this State. The more I learn about Oregon's history of racial discrimination, particularly our legacy of anti-Black racism, the more strongly I feel the need for us to make decisions that will separate Oregon's future from our shamefully racist origins.

Oregon's felony disenfranchisement law dates back to 1857 and stems from our state's many attempts to exclude non-white people from settling here. It is used to this day as a tactic meant to suppress the vote of Oregonians of color, particularly Black Oregonians, who are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration.

Conditions in prisons are often deplorable and incarcerated Oregonians have no official recourse to protest their abuse or advocate for better conditions if they are denied a voice in society. If people who are incarcerated are enfranchised as an official constituency group, legislators will likely be more inclined to listen to their needs.

This issue is also about dignity. When we restore the right to vote, we send the message that people's lives and voices still matter, and that they haven't been thrown away. Involvement in civic life promotes a sense of belonging to the communities that most incarcerated people will eventually re-enter, and has been shown to prevent instances of recidivism.

A state that denies any of its citizens the right to vote, for any reason, is not a truly democratic state. Oregon already leads the way in terms of voter access. Now, we have the chance to again be at the forefront of expanding equitable access to voting rights, joining the over 20 states currently examining making this change.

For these reasons, I urge you to ensure that Guaranteeing the Right to Vote, SB 579, is fully funded and passed out of committee.

Thank you.