

February 23, 2022

Government Administration and Elections Committee
Legislative Office Building Room 2200
Hartford, CT 06106
VIA Email

Re: Request to Raise Voting Acces and Reenfranchisement Act

Dear Senator Flexer,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to respectfully ask you to raise the *Voting Access and Reenfranchisement Act* for a public hearing during the 2022 legislative session. This bill would affirm the centrality of voting as a core civic right and make Connecticut a national leader in democracy restoration and racial justice. This proposal is the result of over a year of research, with input from correctional officials, registrars, town clerks, advocates, academics, and policy experts. The bill would restore voting rights to persons convicted of a felony and reduce obstacles to voting access for incarcerated people. The proposed bill and a summary are attached for your convenience.

Ensuring access to the ballot for incarcerated citizens in Connecticut would mark a strong step towards racial justice in the state. Felony disenfranchisement laws, a legacy of Jim Crow-era politics, coupled with complex absentee ballot procedures for those behind bars, disproportionately exclude members of historically marginalized communities in our state, including Black and Latinx communities, from the democratic process. As of December 2021, 71% of Connecticut's incarcerated people were Black or Latinx,¹ even though these groups constitute only 29% of the state's residents.² These laws are continuations of Connecticut's historical legacy of disenfranchising minority populations. Connecticut denied African-Americans the right to vote until 1876, when the state was forced to extend the franchise by the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In contrast, by the start of the Civil War, all other New England states allowed African-Americans to vote. And, in 1855 Connecticut became the first state in the nation to enact literacy tests to suppress voting by minorities and immigrants.

¹ Connecticut Department of Corrections, Research Unit Statistics, January 1, 2022, available at <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOC/Pdf/MonthlyStat/Stat01012022.pdf>

² United States Census Bureau, [https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CT/RHI825219?](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CT/RHI825219?_lang=en)

Connecticut, unlike most states, retained literacy tests as a condition of voting for over 100 years until the practice was banned by the federal government through passage of the 1970 amendment to the Voting Rights Act.³ The *Voting Access and Reenfranchisement Act* gives Connecticut an opportunity to reverse this history and be a national leader in removing barriers to voting.

The right to vote is a hallmark of citizenship. Connecticut's incarcerated citizens are taxpayers, and more than half are parents. These citizens retain their civic interest in the policies that shape the lives of their children and grandchildren and their communities. This bill recognizes those continuing interests by preserving the enfranchisement of citizens convicted of felonies and removing procedural barriers to voting. Protecting incarcerated citizens' right to vote not only maintains their right to participate in their government, but also enforces and builds their investment in their community, aids in their reentry, and is a smart criminal justice and public safety measure. Civic participation has been linked with lower recidivism rates [and higher measures of well-being](#), including employment, education, and both mental and physical health. Cities in Connecticut with the [lowest voter turnout](#) have the [highest arrest and reincarceration rates](#). According to [one study](#), non-voters are rearrested at more than twice the rate of voters.

Two other New England states, Maine and Vermont already protect the voting rights of incarcerated individuals. Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico also allow people with felony convictions behind bars to vote, and other states and localities, including Alabama and Mississippi, allow many people to vote while serving their sentences. Connecticut can too. Connecticut can ease the burden of registration and voting on our hardworking election officials while safeguarding the voting rights of our citizens.

The undersigned comprise a broad coalition of local activists; government officials; students; academics; non-profits and NGOs; and the formerly incarcerated. This bill would affirm the centrality of voting as a core civic right and make Connecticut a national leader in democracy restoration and racial justice. We ask that you raise and support the *Voting Access and Reenfranchisement Act* in 2022.

Sincerely,

³ Steve Thornton, *Literacy Tests and the Right to Vote*, Connecticut History, <https://connecticuthistory.org/literacy-tests-and-the-right-to-vote/>

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The Full Citizens Coalition to Unlock the Vote

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