Testimony in Support of S.B 53
An Act Concerning Electoral Privileges for Incarcerated Individuals

Abigail Raynor
Committee on Government Administration and Elections
March 11th, 2019

Representative Fox, Senator Flexer, and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, my name is Abigail Raynor, and I am a current MPH candidate at the Yale School of Public Health who is passionate about the role electoral processes play in promoting equity. I am writing today to testify in support of Senate Bill 53, An Act Concerning Electoral Privileges for Incarcerated Individuals, given the potential this piece of legislation has to encourage the representation of all perspectives in the State’s voting processes, and to promote the fundamental constitutional rights of all United States citizens.

Denying individuals their right to vote based on criminal status is one of the foremost ways governments systemically remove large numbers of people from voting populations, potentially shifting the outcomes of elections. This phenomenon occurs because persons of color stand at a greater risk of imprisonment for certain crimes, despite the fact that their white counterparts may be engaging in the same acts at equal or greater rates. Therefore, this bill could potentially attempt to rectify part of the injustices imparted by our prison system, by empowering the voices and perspectives of those who previously served time to participate in electoral processes.

According to Connecticut’s Department of Corrections, in 2016 the state had 15,342 persons incarcerated in prisons and jails. For this population, the Black to White ratio representing the number of Black individuals per White individuals incarcerated was 9.4 to 1, while the Hispanic to White ratio was 3.9 to 1. These numbers should be of concern to all legislators, because as outlined by the NAACP, for drug-related crimes African Americans represent only 12% of the state’s illicit drug users, but 29% of those arrested for such crimes, and ultimately 33% of the prison population incarcerated for those offenses. This demonstrates that for the same degree of illegal activity, persons of color compose a larger percentage of those imprisoned than their White counterparts. This relates to electoral rights because if we do not actively promote the political engagement of those recently released, then as a society and government we become complicit in the institutional silencing of historically marginalized bodies and voices.

As demonstrated by the State of Florida in its recent decision to extend voting rights to the approximately 1.5 million citizens previously convicted of felonies, if the reincorporation of this group into the electoral system had occurred sooner, it would have most likely affected the outcomes of both state and federal elections. Therefore this policy change not only encourages all to engage within their rights as a citizen of the United States, but it also promotes equity as in the case of Florida, prior to the enactment of this law twenty-percent of otherwise eligible African-American adults were unable to vote. This should be of utmost concern to all legislators, as this systematic removal of voice primarily targets historically marginalized groups, like persons of color and members of lower socioeconomic classes.
Finally, there are significant financial benefits to be reaped through the extension of voting rights to a greater percentage of the incarcerated population. This is because electoral engagement has a positive impact on recidivism, in that voting increases feelings of community involvement, potentially making individuals less likely to commit another crime that would place them back behind bars. Given Connecticut spends $62,159 per inmate ($1,016,118,399 annually), there is a demonstrated need to engage in practices that prevent people from entering the prison system. Therefore, if the extension of voting rights to previously incarcerated individuals was able to reduce re-incarceration rates by even 10%, this would save the State an estimated $536,979,169 annually. Besides the benefit of ensuring constitutional rights to members of disadvantaged groups, this bill would also serve to save the State large sums of money during one of its most financially tumultuous periods.

Although I stand in support of this piece of legislation, a concern raised comes from the clause that states, “… have such person’s electoral privileges restored upon the payment of all fines in conjunction with the conviction…” This stipulation is troubling because it conditions the right to vote on one’s financial capacity to pay. Coming out of prison or jail it can be extremely difficult for individuals to find employment or secure streams of income, which is a burden that falls disproportionately on people who are members of lower socioeconomic classes. Therefore, this clause would bar those who are released from prison or jail and attempting to assimilate back into their communities their constitutional right to vote if they cannot immediately pay back fines. It seems to be more appropriate to link financial capacity to pay to other consequences rather than one’s fundamental constitutional rights. I would urge you to amend the bill to strike this condition placed on one’s electoral privileges.

With this amendment, I do stand in support of Senate Bill 53, An Act Concerning Electoral Privileges for Incarcerated Individuals, and thank the Committee on Government Administration and Elections for considering my testimony. If any members of the committee would like to reach out with further questions or comments, I can be contacted at Abigail.raynor@yale.edu, or over the phone at 203-415-8445.
Sources:


