Dear Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

We submit this testimony in support of SB233, An Act Concerning Elections. The bill restores the voting rights of people on parole. We support this reform and urge the Committee to amend the bill to end felony disenfranchisement in Connecticut entirely.

I. History of Disenfranchisement

Throughout Connecticut’s history, the state has restricted voting rights based on race, gender, literacy, English language abilities, intellectual capacity, and criminal record. Historically, as neighboring states have moved to expand the franchise and promote equality, Connecticut has often lagged behind.

Connecticut’s original 1818 Constitution provided that only “white male” citizens over the age of twenty-one who owned property, paid taxes, or served in the military could vote. By the start of the Civil War, all other New England states allowed African Americans to vote. In 1865, following the Civil War and a contentious debate, the Connecticut General Assembly passed an amendment removing the word “white” from the Connecticut Constitution. However, voters rejected the amendment. It was not until 1876 that African Americans finally gained the right to vote in Connecticut—six years after the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified.

Connecticut was the first state in the country to adopt a literacy requirement in 1855. In 1897, Connecticut added a requirement that voters be able to read in English. These restrictions had a disproportionate impact on recent immigrants and minority voters. The restrictions were

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1 Conn. Const. of 1818 art. VI.
4 Conn. Const. of 1818, amend. XXIII; U.S. Const. amend. XV.
5 Conn. Const. of 1818 amend. XI; see also Keyssar, supra note 2 at 86, 142, 227.
6 Conn. Const. of 1818 amend. XXIX.
finally eliminated by Congress with amendments to the federal Voting Rights Act in 1970.\(^7\) At the time, Connecticut was one of the few states that still had these types of restrictions.\(^8\)

II. Disproportionate Impact of Connecticut’s Felony Disenfranchisement Law

Nationwide, 1 in 13 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised as a result of criminal conviction (compared with 1 in 56 of those who are not African American).\(^9\) Like felony disenfranchisement laws around the country, Connecticut’s felony disenfranchisement law, which strips prisoners and parolees of voting rights, disproportionately impacts people of color. African Americans and Latinos make up approximately two-thirds of Connecticut’s prison population. White non-Hispanic residents in Connecticut represent approximately two-thirds of the state’s general population but only about a third of the state’s incarcerated population.\(^10\)

III. The Need for Reform

Connecticut should join Maine and Vermont and eliminate felony disenfranchisement entirely. In these states, prisons vote via absentee ballot in the towns where they lived prior to their incarceration. Stripping people of voting rights alienates and stigmatizes them. Instead, Connecticut should welcome participation by all in our civic institutions. Restoring voting rights promotes rehabilitation and reintegration into society for those with criminal records. Ending felony disenfranchisement will help promote equality in Connecticut.

Respectfully Submitted,

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\(^8\) Keyssar, supra, note 2.
