To the Co-Chairs and Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

Testimony SUPPORTING SB 233, An Act Concerning Elections

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To co-chairs Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, ranking members Senator Sampson and Representative France and esteemed members of the GAE committee and esteemed members of the GAE committee.

I respectfully submit testimony in my role as Director of the Nancy A Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work in strong support of SB 233 to expand voting access and rights, including greater use of automatic voter registration and allowing formerly incarcerated individuals on parole to vote in all elections.

Voting is essential to a strong democracy, one that represents and responds to the voices and needs of all citizens. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes voting and the ability to participate in free elections in article 21.

Not only is voting a basic human right, but the act of voting is good for individuals and communities. Communities who vote are better off in important ways, including stronger social connections, better employment and greater community well-being (Kansas Civic Health Foundation, 2016). Voting is also shown to reduce the mental health consequences of oppression, increases individual efficacy and provides opportunities to voice opinions, connect with others, and to feel positive about one’s self (Sanders, 2001). In young people, voting was found to be a robust indicator of future education and earnings (Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2018). As further proof of the power of voting, formerly incarcerated persons who had their voting rights restored in Florida were less likely to return to prison (Florida Parole Commission study, 2010).

Despite these benefits, registering and voting can be a daunting task for many in our state. While some people have positive experiences going to the polls, we know that voting in communities with highly mobile populations and/or strained resources can lead to long lines or worse, people not being able to exercise their right to participate. Expanded use of automatic voter registration, which includes updating addresses when people move, would help alleviate this pressure in communities with higher proportion of renters.

We support any efforts to expand voting rights, including for those who have been convicted of a felony. Nationally, nearly 5 million individuals cannot vote because of a felony conviction, which, like the criminal justice system, disproportionately affects people of color. 1 in 13 black voters have been disenfranchised nationally versus 1 in 56 nonblack voters (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016).

Historically, felony disenfranchisement laws were written into state constitutions and statutes to explicitly limit the political power of African Americans and other marginalized groups. The disproportionate rates of criminal punishment by race continue today to systematically reduce the access to the vote and the political power in minority communities (Behrens, Uggen & Manza, 2004;
Felony disenfranchisement laws are currently set at the state level, resulting in wide disparities in access to the ballot state to state (Uggen, Larson & Shannon, 2016; Brennan Center, 2019). The impact of these laws today means that millions of people cannot vote because of their felony status (Uggen, Larson & Shannon, 2016). As a result, millions more don’t vote due to an array of confusing and punitive state laws that govern voting and felony convictions (Brennan Center, 2019). This is true in Connecticut as well. Assisting people to register upon their release would help clear up the wide-spread misinformation about who is eligible to vote.

Connecticut’s law on voting with a felony is the most punitive in New England. The Humphreys Institute not only supports expanding voting rights to those on parole like RI, MA and NH but strongly believes we should follow Vermont and Maine in allowing all citizens to vote.

We are happy to provide additional detail or research the committee may be interested in. Thank you for your time and consideration.

References


http://kansashealth.org/resources/kansas-civil-health-index/


