



Legislative Testimony
765 Asylum Avenue, First Floor
Hartford, CT 06105
860-523-9146
www.acluct.org

**Written Testimony Supporting
House Bill 7213, An Act Concerning Electoral Privileges of
Certain Parolees and Challengers in the Polling Place**

Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

My name is Gus Marks-Hamilton, and I am a Smart Justice organizer for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 7213, An Act Concerning Electoral Privileges of Certain Parolees and Challengers in the Polling Place.

The right to vote is a fundamental part of America's democracy, and the government should not abridge that right lightly. Restoring the right to vote for people who have been disenfranchised and allowing them to participate in campaigning strengthens our democracy by increasing voter participation and helping formerly incarcerated people to reintegrate into society.

As an organization that defends the right to vote and believes that enfranchisement is an incredibly important way for people to participate in America's democracy, the ACLU-CT supports this bill, which would allow formerly incarcerated people convicted of a felony who are on parole to vote, remove the condition that someone pay all fines that were charged along with their conviction before the state restores their right to vote, and allow people on parole to be circulators of a nominating petition page.

Being able to vote in elections is an incredibly important right that should not be denied to someone simply because they were convicted of a crime. More than six million Americans are currently disenfranchised due to a felony conviction. Laws that disenfranchise people because of felony convictions disproportionately disenfranchise Black Americans. In many states, they were, in fact, intended to have this racist effect. The modern practice of felony disenfranchisement became particularly widespread in the Jim Crow era, and after

Reconstruction, white lawmakers codified felony disenfranchisement laws that explicitly targeted Black Americans to diminish their electoral strength.

It is time for Connecticut to allow people on parole to vote, remove a large barrier formerly incarcerated people face in restoring their voting rights, and allow people on parole to participate more fully in elections. This bill would provide a meaningful way to empower people to exercise their fundamental civic right to vote. By passing this bill, Connecticut would join Florida, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and ten other states plus the District of Columbia in affording people on parole their rights to vote. It would also bring Connecticut closer to the models set by Maine, Vermont, and Puerto Rico, which protect incarcerated people's rights to vote, and New Mexico, which is considering such a law.

Connecticut should eliminate the requirement to pay fines imposed along with convictions before someone has their voting rights restored. Voting, a cornerstone of our democracy, should be accessible and free to all eligible voters. With this requirement in place, however, the state is charging members of the public to exercise their rights, forcing some Connecticut residents to pay a fee to enter the ballot box. The right to vote should not be conditioned on the financial ability to pay a fine. Our friends, family members, colleagues, and neighbors who are living with a criminal conviction on their record deserve to cast their vote as much as anyone else, despite their ability to pay fines.

This bill would also remove a provision prohibiting someone on parole for a felony conviction from being a circulator of a nominating petition page. This would give them the opportunity to help a candidate who is not nominated for an elected office by a major or minor party to secure a place on the ballot. If people are allowed to be involved in their community when they return home from incarceration, they will have an easier time reintegrating into that community and will be less likely to reoffend.

Mass incarceration, combined with disenfranchisement laws, subverts participatory democracy, particularly for communities of color. Restoring the right to vote for people on parole, removing a financial barrier to restoring the right to vote, and allowing people on parole to participate in getting candidates on the ballot are the first steps to dismantling these harmful and discriminatory laws.

The ACLU-CT encourages the committee to support House Bill 7213, which will help people living with criminal records more fully participate in our democracy.