

RHODE ISLAND COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

180 WESTMINSTER STREET

PROVIDENCE, RI 02903

TESTIMONY

BILL NO.: 2025 H 5232
BILL TITLE: Act Relating to Elections – Mail Ballot
PRIMARY SPONSORS: Representative J. Brien
COMMITTEE: House State Government & Elections

The Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (“Commission”) **opposes** this bill which decreases the time period for early voting.

The Commission is the state’s primary antidiscrimination law enforcement agency charged with investigating allegations of discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and delivery of services. Among the allegations investigated by the Commission are those of race, ancestral origin, age and disability discrimination in employment and housing.

The Commission believes that passage of this bill, which would make it harder for Rhode Island citizens to vote, would decrease voting by ethnic minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities and those who are poor. This bill would decrease the early voting period from 20 days to 10 days prior to the election.

It is evident that voters who rely on others for transportation, such as senior citizens without driver’s licenses, or those with certain disabilities, will have less opportunity to vote if this bill passes. It is also likely to depress minority participation. *See Weeks, D., Why are the Poor and Minorities Less Likely to Vote?, The Atlantic (1/10/14):*

According to a Caltech/MIT survey of both registered and unregistered eligible voters who did not cast a ballot in 2008, disapproval of candidate choices, busyness, illness, transportation, and registration/administrative problems were the leading causes of non-participation, with considerable variation across groups.... They **[Black and Hispanic citizens, for whom the poverty rate is close to three times that of whites] were also substantially more likely than whites to report transportation problems and bad time**

and location as reasons for not getting to the polls... [Emphasis added.]

The voices of all Rhode Island citizens need to be heard. This bill would reduce the opportunity for all Rhode Island voters to participate in our democracy. The Commission urges that you do not pass H 5232.

Commission contact: Commissioner Cynthia Hiatt, 222-7563