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Rhode Island Works Best When We Say UNION YES.

April 16, 2026

Representative Evan P. Shanley
Chair, House State Government and Elections Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: RI AFL-CIO in SUPPORT of H-8334, RI Voting Rights Act

Dear Chairman Shanley and members of the committee

On behalf of the Rhode Island AFL-CIO, representing more than 80,000 union members and their families across the state, we enthusiastically submit this testimony in support of H-8334, the Rhode Island Voting Rights Act.

The purpose of the Rhode Island Voting Rights Act (RI VRA) is to codify the protections in the federal Voting Rights Act to ensure Rhode Island's elections are fair and accessible.

Historically workers have fought for and used their right to vote to combat low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Dating back to the advent of the modern labor movement in the nineteenth century, working class people used hard fought union tactics to fight for access to the vote. The Dorr Rebellion was fought in part by Irish immigrant workers who were excluded from the vote because they were not members of the land-owning class. This conflict led to the adoption of Rhode Island's first state constitution in 1842, over six decades after our state declared independence from Great Britain.

More broadly, the fight for women's suffrage - the longest struggle for the largest enfranchisement of voters in the country - was accelerated in the 1910s when working women joined the struggle. These women, many of whom were union leaders in the textile and garment industries, understood that they were never going to win against the boss, which paid them less based on gender and immigration status, unless they had power at the ballot box.

Labor unions were instrumental in the fight for the Voting Rights Act (VRA) as well. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a pivotal moment in the American Civil Rights movement, it was also deeply connected to the labor movement. Walter Reuther, president of one

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of the largest unions in the country at the time, was a close ally of Martin Luther King Jr., serving as a key organizer, speaker, and financier for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. As UAW president, Reuther mobilized union support, provided funding for the event, and argued that civil rights were a moral, economic, and human issue, not just a political one.

At its core, the labor movement views democracy not just as a civic value, but as a workplace issue. Strong voting rights help create the conditions where workers can organize, advocate, and win protections. This is reflected directly in the structure of our movement.

Unions are inherently democratic institutions. As union members, we vote to form a union (an election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board), we vote for our contracts, we vote to strike and we vote for our leadership. For our members, access to the ballot is just as crucial as access to union representation. It is the most basic way for workers to assert their power and fight for their jobs and their families.

Fair representation is critical for passing pro-worker legislation. A strong democracy means strong workers rights. It is for these reasons that the RI AFL-CIO is in strong support of H-8334 and we urge the committee to pass the RI VRA. Thank you for your time and consideration, along with the opportunity to provide written testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions, 401-751-7100.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Autumn Guillotte".

Autumn Guillotte
Political Director, Rhode Island AFL-CIO

