

## JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

### Testimony on House Bill 8334, Rhode Island Voting Rights Act House State Government & Elections Committee April 16, 2026

Good afternoon members of the House State Government & Elections Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio. I'm a resident of Cumberland Rhode Island. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

**I strongly urge your favorable consideration and support for H-8334 – An Act Relating to Elections – Rhode Island Voting Rights Act**, sponsored by Representative Kazarian, and co-sponsored by Representatives Shanley, Fogarty, Edwards, Furtado, Messier, Alzate, Casimiro, Stewart, and Boylan.

**This legislation seeks to establish a state voting rights act based on the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. This would preserve the fundamental rights of Rhode Islanders against federal threats by preventing discrimination in voting, establishing a private right of action, and allowing prevailing plaintiffs to recover attorney's fees.**

#### **Why Voting Matters for Public Health**

**Health disparities remain an intractable public health problem.** Consequently, public health research has shifted its efforts towards advancing health equity by focusing on the **social determinants of health (SDOH)**. **These are the conditions in which we live, work, learn, which research suggests account for 30% to 50% of health outcomes** [1]. Crucially, these SDOH are often the result of political action and policy decisions that remain beyond the control of the individual.

To achieve health equity, we must ensure that **all people have a voice in the political process**. This requires supporting voter inclusion, streamlining registration, and adopting policies that advance civic participation [1]. **Voting is a public health issue because it helps shape the “conditions in which people can be healthy”** [2].

The data supporting this link is robust:

- **Self-reported health:** Individuals who vote tend to report better health than those do not vote [1], [3], [4].
- **The Health and Democracy Index:** Research from Northern Illinois University's Health and Democracy Index found that states with **low “voting costs”** (characterized by less restrictive voting policies) **exhibit better health outcomes** [5].
- **Impact of Restrictions:** Conversely, states with higher “voting costs” (restrictive voter registration policies, restrictive ID requirements, no vote-at-home options, and no voting rights restorations) exhibit worse population health outcomes [5].

A review conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Rand Corporation of 64 studies specifically **examining the relationship between voting and health found that good health is consistently and positively associated with a higher likelihood of voter participation** [4].

According to the American Public Health Association (APHA) it is crucial that we **advance evidence-based strategies to improve civic and voter participation** [1]. One such strategy is the **advancement of policies that make voting easier, more accessible, and more inclusive. Establishing election standards** found in H-8334 is a critical step toward a healthier, more equitable Rhode Island.

I urge you to **support and pass House Bill 8334**.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jocelyn P. Antonio, MPH

## **Reference:**

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- [3] D. H. Briggs and G. Mahs, "Voting is Not Only Good for the Public's Health but for Public Health, Too," Network for Public Health Law. Accessed: Apr. 16, 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.networkforphl.org/news-insights/voting-is-not-only-good-for-the-publics-health-but-for-public-health-too/>
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- [5] "Health & Democracy Index." Accessed: Apr. 16, 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://democracyindex.responsivegov.org/>