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To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Subject: Testimony supporting HB 8334

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Dear Chair Shanley and honorable committee members,

Over the past two decades, federal court rulings have significantly weakened the federal Voting Rights Act's protections, and enforcement by the current Department of Justice cannot be relied upon. Rhode Island should not wait to see how far those protections erode before acting.

H 8334 would enshrine in state law protections against discriminatory election practices, provide a cause of action for voters whose access to the ballot is denied or abridged on the basis of race or protected class status, and go beyond the federal law in two important respects.

First, the RIVRA would require language access in elections. Rhode Island currently has no state law requirement to provide language assistance to voters. For Spanish-speaking voters, that gap is a real barrier to participation. H 8334 addresses it directly.

Second, the RIVRA would provide remedies for voters who face threats or intimidation at the polls, something the federal VRA does not cover. Voters who feel unsafe or unwelcome when casting a ballot would have recourse under state law.

Voting rights are only meaningful if they are enforceable. H 8334 gives Rhode Islanders the tools to protect their own access to the ballot, independent of what happens at the federal level. We urge the committee to move it forward.

Thank you for your consideration, and for all you do for all Rhode Islanders.

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