

Good evening to the members of the Special Committee on Reapportionment,

My name is Rachel Bishop and I'm a Providence resident who is testifying to urge the committee to stop the practice of prison gerrymandering - to uphold the promise of one person, one vote. The current practice means the votes of those in the whiter, wealthier districts of our prisons count more than others in RI, and especially more than Blacker, Browner, and poorer districts where many imprisoned people come from. Arguments in favor of the current practice fail to make any compelling case that justifies this blatant unfairness.

One argument is that this is how things have worked since our country's founding, and ought therefore to continue. I don't need to remind this group that we've undone plenty of original policies around voting in this country because they were unjust toward women, non-land owning men, and Black people. The fact that 12 other states, including our neighbors in Connecticut, have ended this policy is ample evidence that it is of course feasible.

Another argument is that imprisoned people are legitimately residents of the districts in which they're imprisoned. The crux of this argument seems to be that prisons occasionally rely on police or fire services. Of course, police and fire services also respond to the Dunkin Donuts Center and the Statehouse, but folks who work there aren't considered residents of Providence on that basis. Further, if the state really does believe that imprisoned people are residents of the districts in which they're imprisoned, why is it that their children are not allowed to attend school there? This hypocrisy makes clear the cynicism behind this argument. If you were in prison, would you want your influence added to the people who happen to surround the place you're incarcerated or toward your family and your home?

Finally, I've heard the comparison to college. If college students get counted toward their college town's district, then why should it be different for imprisoned people? Two reasons. First, many imprisoned people cannot vote. College students can choose to vote in their college town or their home town, whereas the only electoral influence prisoners have is whether their body is counted toward their district. Secondly, and most importantly, college students come from many different areas and states so the impact of shifting influence away from them is disbursed. In contrast, prisoners in RI all come from Rhode Island, and are disproportionately from Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls. The net effect is to transfer voting power away from low-income voters of color in these areas and toward high-income white voters in Cranston and Warwick.

At our country's founding, we denied suffrage to enslaved Black people and counted them as $\frac{3}{5}$ toward their Congressional district size. Today, we deny suffrage to imprisoned people, disproportionately Black, and do not count them toward their home district size. Racist intent here is irrelevant- the impact is racist, and it needs to end. If you support the continued practice, you are saying you are fine with this power theft. You are also saying that my vote, as a Providence voter, matters less than my neighbors in Cranston and Warwick. This is not right, and it needs to end.

I urge you to take action now, before another decade goes by, to bring us one step closer to equal representation.

Thank you,

Rachel Bishop