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Written Testimony in Support of S. 3143
R.I. General Assembly Senate Judiciary Committee

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for having me here today to testify on this important issue in support of Senate Bill 3143. My name is Lillian Gale, and I am a Civic Engagement Fellow at Brown Votes, the nonpartisan University-sponsored voting and democratic participation initiative of Brown University, where I am a sophomore studying Political Science and Economics on the Public Policy track.

I come before you today not only in my role at Brown Votes, but as a first-generation college student from a rural community. Growing up, access to information, to civic institutions, and to opportunity was never guaranteed. There were no conversations about how policies affect our daily lives, no guidance on registering, and no real sense that our voices mattered in shaping government.

I have learned from growing up in my community that barriers to participation are often invisible but still deeply felt. They are rooted in a lack of resources, limited civic education, and systems that were not built with all citizens in mind. That is why legislation like the Rhode Island Voting Rights Act is so important—it recognizes that equal access to voting is not just about formal rights, but about meaningful opportunity to participate.

This bill acknowledges that barriers to voting do not always announce themselves—they can be embedded in systems that unintentionally exclude communities based on race, language, income, or background. Under this bill, a voting policy can be challenged based on its impact on communities of color, even if there's no proof of intent to discriminate. Overall, this bill helps make sure all Rhode Islanders—no matter their race, color, sex, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, country of ancestral origin, or change in marital status—have a fair and equal opportunity to vote.

The bill also addresses vote dilution. For people coming from underrepresented or rural backgrounds, this is especially significant. When communities already feel disconnected from government, systems that further reduce their influence only deepen that disengagement. This legislation provides tools to push back more quickly while avoiding litigation.

Finally, this bill ensures language access for Rhode Islanders on Election Day. While my own barrier was not language, the underlying issue is the same: without intentional support, many *eligible* voters are effectively excluded from full participation. This provision ensures that democracy is not limited by language proficiency, just as it should not be limited by geography or educational background.

Mr. Chairman, one of our guiding principles at Brown Votes is to meet students where they are at. Democracy should be accessible no matter where you grew up, your educational background, or your preferred language. Democracy must give our citizens the tools to participate fully and equally.

Thank you.