



WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Bill No.: SB 3143
An Act Relating to Elections – Rhode Island Voting Rights Act

Primary Sponsors: Senators Lawson, Gallo, Sosnowski, Murray, Gu, Urso, Ujifusa, Vargas, Lauria, and Kallman

Committee: Senate Judiciary

Date: April 7, 2026

The Rhode Island Women’s Bar Association (“RIWBA”) supports this bill. RIWBA is a non-profit organization that promotes the advancement of the status of women in the State of Rhode Island and in the legal profession.

The Rhode Island Voting Rights Act is a vital and timely measure to defend the fundamental right of every eligible Rhode Islander to participate freely and fairly in our democracy. This bill accomplishes two primary objectives: first, it insulates our state’s elections from the ongoing erosion of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965; and second, it provides clear, modern, and enforceable standards to combat discriminatory voting practices here in Rhode Island.

This is not a radical proposal. Rather, it thoughtfully adapts and codifies established legal principles into state law, providing clarity for election administrators and robust remedies for voters. The core of the bill is its clear prohibition on vote dilution and voter suppression. The bill codifies a ‘results’ test and ‘totality of the circumstances’ analysis, drawing on well-established factors used in federal litigation. This provides the court with a familiar and comprehensive framework for evaluating claims of vote dilution, ensuring predictable and well-reasoned application of the law.

A right is not meaningful if it cannot be exercised. The bill’s language access provisions are a significant step toward ensuring all eligible citizens can cast an informed vote. By setting clear, data-driven demographic thresholds, the bill requires specific political subdivisions to provide translated ballots and other election materials. This moves beyond the abstract principles and established concrete, enforceable duties.

Rights without remedies are merely suggestions. The bill creates a powerful yet balanced enforcement scheme. It grants a private right of action to aggrieved individuals and organizations, empowering them to defend their own rights in court. Simultaneously, the bill includes a 60-day pre-suit notice requirement to encourage collaboration and provide political subdivisions with a ‘safe harbor’ period to voluntarily remedy potential violations before litigation is filed. This refutes any claim the bill is designed to simply invite lawsuits; rather, its goal is compliance and correction. Finally, the provision for prevailing plaintiffs to recover attorneys’ fees ensures that access to justice is not limited to the wealthy. This is a standard and essential feature of civil rights statutes.

The legal landscape governing voting rights is in a state of flux. Federal court decisions have significantly weakened the federal Voting Rights Act, which for decades served as the primary shield against discriminatory election laws. The recent federal cases have invalidated the preclearance formula that required jurisdictions with a history of discrimination to obtain federal approval for voting changes, while others have made it more difficult to challenge suppressive voting laws under Section 2 of the Act.

This judicial erosion, coupled with proposals in Congress like the “SAVE Act” that would create new and burdensome barriers to voting, makes it imperative for states to act. Rhode Island cannot afford to be passive. This bill proactively establishes a comprehensive state-law framework to protect our citizens, ensuring that vital protections remain in place regardless of future federal court rulings or legislative actions.

RIWBA strongly supports this legislation because it is a necessary, prudent, and well-crafted piece of legislation defending the core of our representative government by ensuring every eligible citizen can participate in the electoral process. It provides clear rules for election officials, promotes cooperative problem-solving, and guarantees that our states’ laws will protect the right to vote for generations to come.

For these reasons, RIWBA respectfully urges the Committee to favorably consider this bill.

RIWBA contact:

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