

## **Testimony SB 647**

### **Election Law - Incarcerated Individuals - Voter Hotline and Eligibility (Voting Rights for All Act)**

#### **Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee (02/26/2025)**

**Position:** Favorable

My name is Robert Stewart, and I am an Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland-College Park. My research includes the study of national and state-level felony disenfranchisement policies, social and political engagement among people with criminal records, and criminal justice administration. I write in favor of SB 647.

Four states (plus Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico) allow some or all *of* their citizens who are incarcerated in prison to vote.<sup>1</sup> Voters in prison in these states generally register at their most recent address prior to incarceration and vote absentee. At least six states are currently considering bills similar to SB 647.<sup>2</sup> These developments align with the clear trend over the last decade, which has been toward reducing the scope of felony disenfranchisement policies in many states across the country. Since just 2020, eleven states have revised their disenfranchisement policies to expand voting rights to people with felony records. The motivations behind these more expansive ballot access policies for people with criminal records have included racial justice, the principled view that voting is a fundamental right, and various potential benefits for individuals and society.

for people with criminal records—including those in prison—outweighs any potential costs, and that such reforms align with Maryland’s goals to prioritize public safety and promote reintegration.

People vote because they care about the future of their communities. From my research on the political behavior and ideology of people with felony records, I would not expect that allowing people in prison to vote would have a significant effect on election outcomes, in part because people with felony records tend to express more moderate partisan views than the general population.

But I would expect a positive effect on post-release outcomes. Prior research indicates that voting is among several prosocial activities, like employment and marriage, that are associated with a decreased likelihood of future criminal activity. Among people with criminal records, those who vote are less likely to be arrested, more likely to successfully complete probation and parole, and less likely to commit new crimes upon release. Conversely, there is no evidence that expanding voting rights would lead to greater crime.

In addition to these potential public safety and reintegration benefits, SB 647 would also simplify the process for election administration. It would remove ambiguities or confusion among both affected people and election administrators, such as those related to sentencing alternatives or transitional programs (e.g., work release). Based on my research in other states, refraining from implementing carve-outs for specific offenses or correctional statuses creates an unambiguous bright line, eliminating the need for election

---

<sup>1</sup> Maine, Vermont, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico have no disenfranchisement restrictions; Alabama and Mississippi disenfranchise only those people convicted of certain felony offenses.

<sup>2</sup> Illinois, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Washington are currently considering bills that would allow some or all otherwise eligible citizens in prison to vote.

administrators to significantly interpretate a potential voter's criminal history or correctional status. Maryland's existing policies and procedures for registration of overseas voters could be adapted to the circumstances of incarcerated people, thus avoiding a potential dilution effect for communities with prisons.

For all these reasons, SB 647 is supported by social science, and I respectfully recommend that the committee issue a favorable report.

Sincerely,

Robert Stewart, Ph.D.  
University of Maryland  
robstew@umd.edu