

February 24, 2025

Honorable Senators of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

I request a favorable report of SB 0647. Incarcerated individuals are citizens and should have the right to vote.

I became a professor of political science because I believe deeply in civic engagement, and I understand how important it is for college students to find their own political agency and to become politically efficacious individuals. I understand how critical it is for our communities to be comprised of individuals who are bound together by a shared sense of responsibility and who join together (with all their varied talents, skills, and interests) to build something bigger and stronger than they would be otherwise. The positive externalities that come from such communities are endless. Not only are individuals thusly situated more likely to vote, but those who are allowed to vote are also more likely to foster positive engagement with their communities.

Since 2018, I have had the great pleasure of teaching with the Goucher Prison Education Partnership. I have taught at least six courses between our campuses in MCIJ and MCIW. In many of my courses (regardless of where I am teaching), I teach students how to write in the policy realm... students might learn how to write legislation in my Seminar on Congress or op-eds in my American Politics course. No matter the type of policy writing, without fail, the number one issue students want to write about is their inability to vote. My incarcerated students especially, find it incredibly unjust and unfair they are not allowed to vote.

Maine, Vermont and DC all allow incarcerated individuals to vote. Those who are incarcerated can vote using their pre-incarceration address. This right was established in Maine in 1976, in Vermont in 2005, and the incarcerated were re-enfranchised in DC in 2000. Maryland should be next on the list.

The academic literature supports what many of us know to be true – individuals who end up in jail, typically have a negative view of government and have had very difficult interactions with the state. Without any intervention, upon release those individuals will still have a negative perception of the state. They are not likely to be positively engaged

in their communities, and highly likely to recidivate. How we treat individuals while they are incarcerated predicts a lot about how those individuals will engage in their communities upon release. If we don't give people the ability to develop their agency in a positive manner while incarcerated, we can't expect them to be positively engaged in their communities afterward. Stripping prisoners of their voting rights does nothing but reinforces the negative relationship they already have with the state.

Re-enfranchising incarcerated individuals alone is not going to ensure all will be productive, engaged community members upon release. And in fact, there will not be a surge in voting should their voting rights be re-instated.¹ There are other critical components of the rehabilitative process in prison that also need to be in place. However, not stripping people of their right to vote communicates a lot about how we see incarcerated individuals and is a necessary step in redirecting their relationships with the state in a more positive direction.

I have learned again and again in my career as a professor – if you have high expectations of individuals and treat them positively, they will rise to the occasion and respond in kind. If we want to help incarcerated individuals feel valued by the state and feel like they can be productive members of the community – we should not strip them of their voting rights. You have the power to reverse what never should have been done and to re-instate those voting rights.

I ask for a favorable report of SB 0647.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nina Kasniunas', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr. Nina Therese Kasniunas
Associate Professor of Political Science
Chair, Department of Political Science and Int'l Relations

¹ Studies conducted in Vermont and Maine show only about a third of the incarcerated populations were registered to vote, and only 8% voted in 2018 (White & Nguyen 2022).