

Dean Esserman, H. Philip West: Without a vote, citizens have no voice

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ON PRIMARY DAY In Rhode Island, more than 15,000 Rhode Island citizens stayed home from the polls because the state's constitution bars them from the voting booth. These citizens live in our communities, work, pay taxes, and support their families, yet they are deprived of the right to vote because of past felony convictions.

Restoring voting rights to these citizens of the community would strengthen our democracy and enhance public safety. We are among the many supporters of Ballot Question 2, a referendum to restore voting rights.

Ballot Question 2 has the support of prominent public officials, law enforcement, businesses, and community organizations. The endorsers include Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline, Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva-Weed, Senate Minority Leader Dennis L. Algieri, House Majority Leader Gordon D. Fox, former U.S. Attorney Margaret Curran, and Secretary of State Matthew A. Brown. Numerous organizations -- including the League of Women Voters, the Urban League, the NAACP, the Rhode Island Bar Association, the Rhode Island State Council of Churches, and Progreso Latino -- also endorse passage of Ballot Question 2.

Peter Slom grew up in Newport. In his mid-30s he spent two years in prison, for drug offenses. Today, he lives with his wife and two sons in Charlestown, where he is active in community affairs, including his volunteer work as chairman of the Charlestown Juvenile Hearing Board. He works full time as a licensed clinical social worker, at the state Training School. He completed his jail time and was discharged 14 years ago. Since his discharge, Peter has never been in trouble, but he cannot vote until 2008.

Andres Idarraga spent 6 1/2 years in prison for drug and gun offenses. Released two years ago, he entered the University of Rhode Island and earned straight A's. He transferred to Brown University, where he studies comparative literature and economics, with scholarship help and two part-time jobs. Now 28, he will not be allowed to vote until his probation expires, when he is 58.

These are just two examples among thousands: people imprisoned for crimes who served their time, have been released, and now live in neighborhoods throughout Rhode Island.

Rhode Island holds the dismal distinction of disenfranchising more of

our citizens than any other state in New England. We currently bar blacks and Latinos from voting at rates higher than 37 other states, including many Southern states, with their history of racial violence and discriminatory literacy tests that barred people of color from voting.

Today, entire Rhode Island communities suffer the impact of long-term disenfranchisement. Fifty-eight percent of the state's disenfranchised population comes from five cities: Providence, Pawtucket, Newport, Central Falls, and Woonsocket.

Although more than half of all disenfranchised citizens in Rhode Island are Caucasian, black residents are barred from voting at a rate at least four times that of whites. In Providence and Newport, more than one in four black men cannot vote; in Woonsocket, more than one in seven Hispanic men cannot vote. Barring these individuals from voting goes against democracy, successful prisoner re-entry, and community safety.

Allowing citizens on probation or parole to vote, as Ballot Question 2 would do, could reduce recidivism. Recent research has found that people who have been previously arrested and who voted are 50 percent less likely to be re-arrested than are their non-voting peers.

Denying the vote to people who have completed their prison sentence disrupts the re-entry process and weakens the long-term prospects for sustainable rehabilitation. Voting -- like reconnecting with family, getting a job, and finding a decent place to live -- is part of a responsible return to life in the community. Voting allows these people

to practice their commitment to the institutions of democracy.

For more information, go to www.restorethevote.org.

On Nov. 7, Rhode Island voters should strengthen democracy and restore the political voice of thousands of men and women who are denied the right to vote. Rhode Island will be a stronger and healthier democracy when we restore voting rights to all Rhode Island citizens by voting yes on Ballot Question 2.

Dean Esserman is chief of the Providence police. H. Philip West is executive director of Common Cause of Rhode Island.