



**Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on Election Laws
In support of H.26/S.8 Proposal for a legislative amendment
to the Constitution relative to voting rights**

**By Nancy Brumback and Nell Forgacs, LWVMA Legislative Specialists, Elections and
Voting**

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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts urges the Joint Committee on Election Laws to favorably report H.26/S.8, Proposal for a legislative amendment to the Constitution relative to voting rights and begin the process of restoring the right to vote to people incarcerated for felony convictions.

The core principle of the League of Women Voters is “voting is a fundamental citizen right that must be guaranteed.” We don’t accept exceptions to that right. And for most of its history, Massachusetts agreed that people incarcerated for felonies continued to have the right to vote. Only when the establishment felt threatened by the civic actions of some in prison did those in power decide to put the voting rights of incarcerated felons to a popular vote with a ballot question in 2000. The League opposed that ballot question. We oppose using a majority vote and opinion polls to decide whether a defined minority has the right to vote. We strongly support H.26/S.8, to amend the state Constitution to restore the right to vote that was revoked in 2000.

Those incarcerated for felonies are paying the price for their crimes with their imprisonment. Most will be released when they complete their sentence. Permitting them to retain the right to vote while incarcerated is, first, the right thing to do; they are still citizens. But that right can also help connect them to their communities and to society at large and increase the chances of a successful rehabilitation. Restoring the vote to those incarcerated will restore their votes to their communities and increase the voice of those communities in decision-making.

The League does acknowledge the leadership Massachusetts has shown in granting the right of those with felony convictions to vote immediately upon completion of their sentence. We applaud your work in last session’s VOTES Act to assure that those incarcerated on misdemeanor convictions or awaiting trial have ready access to voting since people do not lose their right to vote under those conditions. Restoring the right to vote to those incarcerated on felony convictions completes this acknowledgement of the right of all citizens to vote.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and our 44 local Leagues serving over 100 communities from Cape Cod to the Berkshires urge you to report H.26/S.8 favorably and to begin the lengthy process to amend our Constitution and undo an amendment that removed the right of those incarcerated for felonies to vote.