

Testimony to Constitutional Convention Preparatory Commission

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Planned Parenthood of Southern New England

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Co-Chairs Euer and Craven, and members of the Constitutional Convention Preparatory Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Planned Parenthood of Southern New England with **strong opposition to a constitutional convention**. Planned Parenthood of Southern New England (PPSNE), provided sexual and reproductive health care to over 7,000 patients last year at our Providence health center. We believe all people should have access to quality, affordable, and compassionate health care as a basic human right — regardless of who you are, where you live, your income, if you have health insurance or your immigration status.

We are proud that Rhode Island is a leader in the fight for reproductive freedom. Over the past five years, we have passed historic legislation like the Reproductive Privacy Act and the Equality in Abortion Coverage Act to make abortion care more accessible to all Rhode Islanders, regardless of their income or insurance coverage. This year we were proud to work with coalition partners and our elected champions to enact protections for health care providers and patients who rely on transgender and reproductive health services with the passage of the Health Care Provider Shield Act.

A constitutional convention opens the floodgates for special interest money to come into our state in a dangerous attempt to strip away the civil rights and protections currently afforded to all Rhode Islanders. Those rights include access to abortion and other reproductive health care. This is not what Rhode Islanders want. A [majority of Rhode Island voters](#) believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.¹ And our state has made incredible progress over the past five years to make abortion care more accessible. That's because Rhode Islanders trust women - our family members, our neighbors, our friends - to make the decisions that are best for themselves. We believe that people in our communities deserve privacy in their medical decisions.

Rhode Island cannot go backwards in our work to ensure that everyone has the ability to control their own bodies, lives, and futures. Yet that is just what could happen with a Constitutional Convention. The last time one was held in 1986, the most notable ballot question from Rhode Island's last convention was a controversial constitutional amendment stating that life begins at conception.

¹ <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-southern-new-england/who-we-are-copy-2/newsroom-copy-2/new-polling-shows-two-thirds-of-voters-support-the-equality-in-abortion-coverage-act-a-critical-policy-for-expanding-access-to-abortion-2>

The abortion language in Section 2 was the second anti-abortion amendment that came out of the 1986 convention:

Section 2. Laws for good of whole — Burdens to be equally distributed — Due process — Equal protection — Discrimination — No right to abortion granted.

*All free governments are instituted for the protection, safety, and happiness of the people. All laws, therefore, should be made for the good of the whole; and the burdens of the state ought to be fairly distributed among its citizens. No person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law, nor shall any person be denied equal protection of the laws. No otherwise qualified person shall, solely by reason of race, gender or handicap be subject to discrimination by the state, its agents or any person or entity doing business with the state. **Nothing in this section shall be construed to grant or secure any right relating to abortion or the funding thereof.**²*

For voters, this amendment was packaged with the broad "equal protection" language and other amendments, including a new free speech clause in the Constitution. As a result, if you wanted to support the free speech addition, you had to vote for the anti-abortion language as well. Additionally, the abortion language included in the ballot question was not mentioned in the ballot summary that voters saw at the polling booth or in the one-page summary provided by the Secretary of State.

Now more than ever, when reproductive rights are under attack across the country, Rhode Islanders must remain vigilant in protecting and expanding access to this critical health care for all people in the Ocean State.

Let's be clear - anti-abortion opponents were never satisfied with overturning *Roe*. Since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, we have continued to witness the devastating consequences of abortion bans and restrictions on patients and the larger health care ecosystem. The post *Dobbs* reality is even more devastating and inhumane than we could have imagined. It is also now harder for people to get lifesaving medical care for miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies, and other pregnancy-related complications. Today, 22 states have banned some or all abortions and those states are also banning gender-affirming care. We know that anti-abortion rights lawmakers and justices will not stop at banning abortion — they are working toward a broader agenda to roll back our rights and freedoms, from access to medication abortion, affordable birth control, transgender health care, fertility health care, to LGBTQ+ rights and more.

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<https://www.rilegislature.gov/riconstitution/Constitution/ConstFull.aspx#:~:text=No%20otherwise%20qualified%20person%20shall,abortion%20or%20the%20funding%20thereof.>

They are using every tool in their tool box - including pouring out-of-state special interest money into ballot questions like the one here in Rhode Island - to push their narrow ideology on us and exert control over our bodies and lives. Across the country, social issues such as attacks on affirmative action, LGBTQ+ rights, and immigrant rights often become the focus of costly statewide campaigns driven by special interest groups. These groups succeed in putting these issues on the ballot outside the regular legislative process.

Additionally, holding a Constitutional Convention will be expensive. According to a fiscal memo prepared for the Commission by House Fiscal Advisory Staff, holding a Constitutional Convention could cost up to \$4.8 million.³ We need to focus the resources in our state on the urgent needs of our residents.

In Rhode Island, since state law already protects these civil rights, a convention is the only viable avenue for opponents to challenge these protections. That's why we have proudly joined over 40 organizations from civil rights, women's rights, labor, and racial justice organizations who oppose a Constitutional Convention, because we refuse to allow our rights and freedoms to be stolen from us.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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³ <https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/CCC/commdocs/08-21-2024%20Fiscal%20Memo.pdf>