

Proposition 2: Abolish Slavery
Guidelines for having conversations
August 25, 2022

TEXT OF THE AMENDMENT

PROPOSAL 2

Sec. 1. PURPOSE This proposal would amend the Constitution of the State of Vermont to clarify that slavery and indentured servitude in any form are prohibited.

Sec. 2. Article 1 of Chapter I of the Vermont Constitution is amended to read:

Article 1. [All persons born free; their natural rights; slavery and indentured servitude prohibited]

That all persons are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety; therefore ~~no person born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person as a servant, slave or apprentice, after arriving to the age of twenty one years, unless bound by the person's own consent, after arriving to such age, or bound by law for the payment of debts, damages, fines, costs, or the like~~ slavery and indentured servitude in any form are prohibited.

Sec. 3. EFFECTIVE DATE The amendment set forth in Sec. 2 shall become a part of the Constitution of the State of Vermont on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November 2022 when ratified and adopted by the people of this State in accordance with the provisions of 17 V.S.A. chapter 32.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

1. I thought we abolished slavery over two hundred years ago. Are you saying we didn't?

We have never in our country completely abolished slavery without exception. The Emancipation Proclamation only affected slaves in Southern states fighting against the Union in the Civil War. The U.S. Constitution, in the Thirteenth Amendment, still has an exception that allows slavery as punishment for a crime. The Vermont Constitution has three exceptions: for those under age 21, for those who consent to being enslaved, and as punishment for debts, damages, and fines. Twenty-five other states have similar exceptions. We have never lived in a country where slavery has been completely abolished under all circumstances.

2. Is this just cleaning up archaic statutes, like not allowing a horse and buggy on a city street?

It will clean up outdated language, but there's more to it than just a little "housekeeping." We have never lived in a country where the immoral institution of slavery has not existed. The Civil War didn't end it, the Emancipation Proclamation didn't, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution didn't. Abolishing slavery in our constitution will make a strong statement that we no longer want our country to view some people as less than others just because of the color of their skin. This vote is really more significant than just a language clean-up.

3. There are currently no people enslaved like they used to be on Southern plantations, so why is this necessary?

Even if chattel slavery is not currently being practiced, it is still morally reprehensible that the concept is allowed in our most important legal documents. It's necessary for us to affirm as a society that we know one person owning another human being is morally wrong and a crime against humanity.

4. I've always heard that Vermont was the first state in the union to abolish slavery. Are you saying that's not true?

Vermont was actually the first state to mention and define the parameters of slavery in its constitution, naming explicit circumstances under which slavery is allowed. And we in fact served as the model for 25 other states to do the same, and eventually for the U.S. Constitution to have an exception in the 13th Amendment.

5. Are you really concerned that this won't pass? Isn't it a no-brainer?

There are a few reasons we want to make sure people know about this before November so that it will pass:

- a. We don't want people to be seeing it for the first time when they walk in the voting booth, so that they ignore it or skip it
- b. There is organized opposition against this movement to abolish slavery in state constitutions in other parts of the country, and we want to be prepared if this opposition comes here as well
- c. A similar proposal failed the first time in Colorado, so it can happen and we don't want to take anything for granted
- d. We've all been surprised by the results of elections in the recent past in our country, so again, we don't want to take anything for granted

6. Why do you want to dredge up bad feelings around race relations by bringing up this subject?

The bad feelings that exist around race relations are already coming out in unhealthy ways like excessive force by police, the incarceration of black people at much higher numbers than they are in the general population, violence against peaceful protests, and brawls at school board meetings, for instance. To not speak of the legacy of slavery and the way it has created the myth of a culture of black criminology, laziness, destruction, and all kinds of other negative qualities doesn't make that legacy go away. It's like sweeping something under the rug that happens to us in our personal lives – not dealing with pain and hurt just makes it come out in other ways, it doesn't heal the pain and hurt. Talking about how slavery has obviously adversely affected our country will help us to reconcile and improve our communities, not damage them further.

7. Is Vermont the only state where this is happening?

No – four other states have already taken out the exceptions to abolishing slavery in their constitutions: Rhode Island, Nebraska, Utah, and Colorado. Several others will have it on their November ballots this year like us: Tennessee, Oregon, and Louisiana for sure, and possibly California, Ohio, Alabama, and Florida. Other states have movements that are working to get it on their ballots soon. Please see the Abolish Slavery National Network website for more information.

8. How will this impact prison labor?

While it is true that not paying or underpaying people for their labor, as we do with those who are incarcerated, can be viewed as a form of enslavement, we will have to have many further conversations and perhaps cases in court before the full implications are known. Right now we just want to get this vote to abolish slavery, plain and simple, on the books.

9. How will this impact trafficking?

Having a constitution that prohibits slavery in any form could have ramifications for buying and selling people for domestic labor or sex work, but there will have to be further discussions and possible court cases. We will find out in future, but for now, we just want to concentrate on this simple, straightforward amendment.

10. Does this mean we have to provide reparations now? Who wants to open up that can of worms?

Some states and cities are already setting up advisory panels or study committees to explore how reparations to descendants of slaves might work, so this isn't opening up anything new. No one knows how those discussions will play out. This amendment just makes the moral statement that it is wrong for one person to own another.

TALKING POINTS

Topline:

The unprecedented act of the complete abolishment of slavery will serve as the foundation to begin to:

- Acknowledge and reconcile historic systems of racism,
 - Create new structures for the economic and cultural empowerment of American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), and
 - Transform state systems to better serve ADOS Vermonters.
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- Although Vermont has claimed to be the first state to abolish slavery, the truth is that the Vermont constitution has permitted slavery in some form longer than any state constitution in the United States (245 years).
 - There are three exceptions to the abolition of slavery in the Vermont constitution. These permit the enslavement of 1) children, 2) those who consent (which may have been people who were coerced or had no real choice) and 3) for the payment of debts and fines.
 - Many other state constitutions and the 13th Amendment to the U.S. constitution were modeled after the slavery exception clause language of the Vermont constitution.
 - To the surprise of many, slavery is still legal in the United States. The exception in the 13th amendment to the U.S. constitution allows slavery and involuntary servitude to be used as punishment for crime.
 - Our country's legacy of slavery is the foundation of systemic racism. According to a declaration by the United Nations in 2018, the large discrepancies by race in rates of poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, income, and incarceration, among many other data, point to the conclusion that "These shameful statistics can only be explained by long-standing structural discrimination on the basis of race, reflecting the enduring legacy of slavery."
 - Any system of oppression harms both the oppressor and the oppressed. While obviously people of color are primarily the ones harmed, white people in the United States are also dehumanizing themselves by not addressing the hatred underpinning our legacy of slavery and by not dismantling the systemic racism that is the consequence of this immoral institution.

- While there's been plenty to discourage us about race relations in our country these last several years, this is a unique chance to take a positive step. We can take pride in and feel good about fixing a longstanding problem and healing a longtime hurt. Furthermore, it's an action we can take right now, this November. Join us in taking a stand for a moral good.

What we want:

Vote YES to Proposal 2 – no slavery, no exceptions.

Vote YES to Proposal 2 to prohibit slavery in Vermont - It is morally reprehensible; it is a crime against humanity.

Vote YES to Proposal 2 to prohibit slavery because the legacy of slavery is the cornerstone of systemic racism.

Vote YES to Proposal 2 to make Vermont one of the first states in the nation to oppose the slavery exception clause in the 13th Amendment to the U.S. constitution.