

Restoring Voting Rights to Citizens with Felony

Number of People Disenfranchised
in the United States, 2000



444,405

CITIZENS ON PAROLE



1,222,378

CITIZENS IN PRISON



CITIZENS ON PROBATION



1,609,710

CITIZENS WHO HAVE FULLY COMPLETED THEIR SENTENCE

TOTAL: 4,653,587

*“Without a vote, a voice,
I am a ghost inhabiting
a citizen’s space.”*

*Joe Loya,
disenfranchised former prisoner*

Don't all U.S. citizens have the right to vote?

No. Most states restrict the voting rights of citizens who have been convicted of felonies. Each of the fifty states has different rules about who can vote. There is no federal law governing the voting rights of people who have been convicted of crimes.

In fact, 4.65 million Americans are disenfranchised, and cannot vote. Depending on the state, people may be barred from voting until they have finished their prison sentence, probation, or parole; paid fines; or completed a complicated and often difficult pardon or clemency process. Only Maine and Vermont allow all imprisoned citizens to vote.

Twelve states permanently disenfranchise some citizens.

In these states, even people who have served their prison terms, completed probation and parole, paid any fines, and been reincorporated into their communities are barred from voting, for life.

Voter eligibility is a well-kept secret. State corrections authorities and elections offices rarely advise convicted citizens of their voting rights, and when they do, often distribute unclear and inaccurate information..

“[Restoring voting rights] would aid ex-convicts in being reintegrated into society...”

U.S. Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA)

Why should citizens with felony convictions vote?

Denying the vote to 4.65 million citizens undermines American democracy. Ex-felon disenfranchisement is at odds with two core American values: the right of citizens to choose their government representatives, and the ability of an individual to start a new life.

No other democracy disenfranchises so many citizens. The United States is the only democracy in the world that takes the vote away from citizens who have completed their sentences. Many countries also allow prisoners to vote, including Canada, Denmark, France, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Norway, Peru, South Africa, Sweden, and Zimbabwe.

It's part of effective rehabilitation. Voting rights restrictions fly in the face of our criminal justice system's goal of rehabilitating those who are serving their sentence.

Disenfranchisement perpetuates discrimination. Voting rights restrictions upon criminal conviction were enacted in many states to prevent African Americans from voting at a time when literacy tests and poll taxes were legal. More than a century later, disenfranchisement laws continue to discriminate. Nationwide, over 13 percent of black adult males are denied the right to vote, and black men make up 36 percent of the total disenfranchised population. These laws disproportionately affect Latinos as well: 16 percent of Latino men will enter prison in their lifetime, compared to only 4.4 percent of white men.

The average disenfranchisement rate is nearly five times higher for blacks than for non-blacks.

BLACK

7.45%

NON-BLACK

1.56%

Source for graphs on pages 1 and 2 and table on page 3: Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, "Democratic Contraction? The Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States," *American Sociological Review* 67:777-803

Momentum for Voting Rights Restoration

The tide has turned. Connecticut recently restored the vote to 36,000 citizens by extending voting rights to citizens on probation. Iowa, Nebraska and New Mexico repealed their lifetime voting bans for persons with felony convictions. Pennsylvania recently restored the right to vote to thousands of people who have completed their sentences. Policy changes that have lowered barriers to voting have also been enacted in Alabama, Delaware, Maryland, Nevada, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming.

Emerging bipartisan, national support for voting rights. In August 2001, the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, chaired by former Presidents Carter and Ford, recommended that all states restore voting rights to citizens who have fully served their sentences. Thirty-one U.S. Senators recently voted for a measure intro-

duced by Senators Harry Reid (D-NV) and Arlen Specter (R-PA) – both former district attorneys – to grant voting rights in federal elections to people upon completion of their sentences. Many members of Congress, including Representative John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI), have also sponsored voting rights legislation in recent years.

Overwhelming public support for restoration of voting rights. According to a July 2002 Harris Interactive poll, 80% of Americans believe that all people who have completed their sentences should have the right to vote. The same poll found that over 60% of Americans believe that citizens on probation or parole should have the right to vote. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor* have editorialized in support of voting by people with felony convictions.

“Disenfranchising felons is an archaic practice, at odds with basic American values about both punishment and democracy.”

The New York Times editorial, 10/17/02

State Report Cards

- A+** Maine and Vermont never strip away voting rights due to felony convictions. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico also does not disenfranchise.
- B** Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah and The District of Columbia deny the vote to prisoners, and allow citizens to vote who are out of prison, on probation, or on parole.
- D** California, Colorado, Connecticut, and New York disenfranchise parolees and prisoners, and allow probationers to vote.
- D-** Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin disenfranchise all citizens on probation, in prison and on parole.
- F** Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming effectively take away the vote for life from all or some citizens with felony convictions, including those who have fully completed the terms of their sentence. Some of these states may restore voting rights through a lengthy and difficult pardon, appeal, or clemency process.

A Look at the Numbers in 2000

State	Disenfranchised
Alabama*	225,095
Alaska	9,230
Arizona	147,340
Arkansas	50,416
California	288,362
Colorado	23,300
Connecticut*	49,864
Delaware	32,692
D.C.	7,598
Florida	817,322
Georgia	286,277
Hawaii	5,053
Idaho	16,064
Illinois	46,992
Indiana	21,458
Iowa*	100,631
Kansas	12,599
Kentucky*	147,434
Louisiana*	37,684
Maine	0
Maryland*	129,836
Massachusetts*	0
Michigan	49,318
Minnesota	41,477
Mississippi	119,943
Missouri	83,012
Montana	3,265
Nebraska*	9,427
Nevada*	66,390
New Hampshire	2,416
New Jersey	143,106
New Mexico*	78,406
New York	131,273
North Carolina	70,653
North Dakota	1,143
Ohio	47,461
Oklahoma	52,089
Oregon	11,307
Pennsylvania	36,847
Rhode Island	19,483
South Carolina	52,210
South Dakota	2,727
Tennessee	91,149
Texas	525,967
Utah	8,896
Vermont	0
Virginia	310,661
Washington	158,965
West Virginia	8,875
Wisconsin	54,025
Wyoming*	17,850
TOTAL	4,653,588

*These states have changed their laws since 2000, affecting the number of people who are disenfranchised.

Take Action!

Know your state's laws. Each state law is different. Visit the Demos website at <http://www.demos.org/votingrights> or call us for the latest information about the ever-changing state laws.

Organize locally. Reach out to local chapters of the NAACP, ACLU, ACORN and other voting rights, low-income, criminal justice reform and social justice organizations. Faith-based community leaders can be influential allies. The National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, Women of Reform Judaism, and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Richmond, VA, among others, have called on lawmakers to restore voting rights automatically. Transitional service providers, law enforcement officials, agencies that work with prisoners, parole and correctional officers' unions, and others working within the criminal justice and community re-entry system may also support re-enfranchisement. For Example, the American Correctional Association has called for automatic restoration of voting rights. Disability advocates are also potential

allies; many current and former prisoners suffer from a variety of disabilities.

Launch a campaign. Your group can initiate a number of projects to increase voter participation and restore voting rights to citizens with felony convictions. Contact Demos or the Right to Vote Campaign for information about successful models for action. You can: 1) work with local civic leaders to sponsor a community forum on this issue; 2) work with your local state legislators to expand the vote to all citizens, including those with criminal convictions; 3) make sure that your local voter registration drives reach eligible, imprisoned citizens, including pre-trial detainees in jail; 4) make sure that your state's corrections department and elections agency are providing accurate information to prisoners and ex-felons about their voting rights.

“If we want former felons to become good citizens, we must give them rights as well as responsibilities, and there is no greater responsibility than voting.”

U.S. Representative John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI)

Contact Demos (www.demos.org) or the national Right to Vote Campaign (www.RighttoVote.org) for more information.

For information about the New York City unLock the Block campaign, call Demos or visit www.unlocktheblock.org.



Demos supports the creation of a diverse, inclusive, and national pro-democracy movement for far-reaching state and federal democracy reform. We strengthen reform efforts by linking democracy advocates and campaigns with their counterparts in other states, developing and advancing a broad agenda for reform, and producing both applied research products and new research on long-range trends that will alter the shape of American democracy in the 21st century.

220 Fifth Avenue, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10001 • 212.633.1405 • www.demos.org