

Voting Restoration for Felons

In America, voting is a right not a privilege. In accordance with the Constitution, it is to be extended to all citizens. Unfortunately, many former felons are stripped of their right to vote while in prison and some are stripped of this essential right for life. This wide spread disenfranchisement of formerly incarcerated felons must not continue. It is a threat to our democracy and our communities.

There are a variety of state laws which place stipulations on felons in regards to their voting rights. These laws vary widely from state to state. For instance, in Maine there is no loss of voting rights for felons and voting can be completed via absentee ballot even while incarcerated. In Alabama, felons voting rights are restored after their full sentence is completed, including prison, probation, and parole. However, in Kentucky a felon can never vote again unless the governor restores their voting rights. While Mississippi has certain criminal convictions that must be pardoned by the governor, while some with other criminal convictions can vote while in jail. This piecemeal state based approach leads to confusion about who with a felony conviction can vote. It also leads to far reaching disenfranchisement among formerly incarcerated individuals.

Minorities and the poor are the most affected by the patchwork of voting laws. Statistics show minority and low-income citizens comprise a disproportionate percentage of the criminal justice system population. This disenfranchisement rate of African Americans is 7.7% (2.2 million people), while the non-African American population is 1.8%. These differences are mostly due to inconsistencies on the part of prosecutors and judges who prosecute and hand down sentences. Poor and non-white people are more likely to be arrested, charged, and sentenced to prison than their wealthy counterparts.

Many felons come from inner-city neighborhoods and when they lose their right to vote it weakens the political power in their already marginalized neighborhoods. Withholding former incarcerated individuals' rights to vote promotes a sense of exclusion and disconnection both from their community and the country as a whole. By excluding people from the community, recidivism increases, thus endangering the community.

A survey taken by homeless citizens with felony convictions illustrates this exclusion. The results showed that many ex-offenders felt like they were "somehow only a fraction of a citizen." They displayed a sense of separation which left little motivation for them to change their criminal behavior. The survey also showed that many were confused about their voting rights. Some were told prior to the start of their incarceration that they may lose their voting rights, while others stated that they weren't given any information at all regarding their voting rights.

This disenfranchisement is totally unacceptable. Felons' rights must be restored to help increase voter participation and strengthen our democracy! So, brothers and sisters

what can we do to change this? While some states have taken steps to restore voting rights to felons upon release, we must continue to put pressure on our politicians to do more. We must make sure that the restoration of the right to vote is a fundamental part of all ex-offenders' reintegration into society.

Additionally, those on trial for a felony offense should be notified at the beginning of criminal proceedings that a felony conviction may mean that some of their civil rights may end, including the right to vote. This should include being informed if they are eligible to vote and education on the process of voter registration prior to being released. All states should have a uniform policy to help minimize the chances of confusion and complications.

One thing is certain; society as a whole benefits when, a representative government truly represents all of its citizens. The only way to achieve this is to ensure as many people as possible have the right to vote. We must stop allowing the politicians to continue stringing along these ex-felons and demand they take serious actions to restore the right to vote for all ex-felons! They must stop talking about it and be about it!