

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/target-2020/voters-in-battleground-states-favor-restoring-pell-grants-for-people-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Editors Note: Since the release of this [blog post](#), there have been two significant developments. First, the House Education and Labor Committee passed a bill out of committee in October 2019 that includes a provision to restore Pell Grant eligibility to incarcerated students, regardless of their conviction or sentence length. The bill is the [College Affordability Act](#) (H.R.4674). Second, the House passed an appropriations spending bill for FY 2021 that would lift the ban on Pell Grant eligibility for all people in prison in language that is nearly identical to that included in the College Affordability Act. We urge Congress to lift the ban on Pell Grant access at its earliest possible opportunity. Postsecondary education in prison is a sound investment in our future, as it improves safety, sparks opportunity, and increases racial equity.

For years, Vera and many of our partners from across the corrections, higher education, and criminal justice spectrum have been calling for the reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for students in prison. And for good reason. The Pell ban is a relic of the 1994 Crime Bill and the tough-on-crime era. Today the ban remains on the books, even though it serves as one of the largest barriers to reentry for justice system-involved people and contributes to higher recidivism rates and increased costs for U.S. taxpayers.

But perhaps things are about to change. That is, of course, if Congress starts listening to voters and other influential voices.

Together the Republican polling firm TargetPoint Consulting and Democratic polling firm GQR recently [conducted a survey](#) in four states: Iowa, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina. They selected those states because they will likely be home to competitive U.S. Senate races in 2020 and because of the strong presence of conservative and independent voters there. In other words, if Pell reinstatement fared well among voters in those four Senate battleground states, that will probably be true among voters elsewhere.

The survey shows that voters overwhelmingly support reinstating Pell Grants for people in prison. In fact, support reaches 69 percent among voters in North Carolina. Majorities in Texas, Iowa, and Georgia also support this change by convincing margins. (See Figure 1.)

These results reflect support across different demographic groups. In other words, white voters and voters of color, college-educated and non-college-educated voters, and men and women all embrace this change. Republican voters and those who lean Republican divide fairly evenly on this issue (48 percent support; 47 percent oppose).

The encouraging news doesn't stop there. Thirty-nine percent of respondents say they would be more likely to support a candidate who supports reinstating Pell grants, only 15 percent are less likely, and 41 percent would say that it makes no difference. (See Figure 2 below.)

Notably, supporters of reinstating Pell Grants bring more intensity to the issue than opponents do. A 57 percent majority of those who support people in prison having access to Pell Grants are more likely to support a candidate who shares this position; only 40 percent of opponents are less likely to support a candidate who supports such access to Pell Grants (just 19 percent are much less likely).

Finally, the survey found that this majority holds up after researchers allowed both sides to make their best case for their respective position. For example, proponents of Pell reinstatement often note that more than 90 percent of people in prison will eventually be released, whether they are ready to reenter society or not. In addition, studies have shown that people who participate in postsecondary education and training programs while incarcerated are about 48 percent less likely to return to prison than people who do not.

Opponents of Pell reinstatement often argue that many families fall into deep debt to pay for college and that people who commit crimes should not be rewarded with money for college courses. Rather than spending money on free education for people in prison, opponents argue that we should be rebuilding roads and bridges, improving health care, and making college affordable for everyone. After voters heard these arguments as part of the survey, support for Pell reinstatement remained unchanged. (See Figure 3.)

These battleground state voters seem to understand that reinstating Pell eligibility for the greatest number of people in prison is a sound investment in our future. Plenty of other influential voices agree.

Bipartisan momentum to get rid of the Pell ban for people in prison has been growing steadily:

So are we at a tipping point for Pell reinstatement? That's a question only Congress can answer. But we're seeing some positive signs from Washington, DC.

The House Education and Labor Committee recently introduced the [College Affordability Act](#) with a provision that, as drafted, would remove the Pell ban for the greatest number of students in prison. In both chambers of Congress, bipartisan support is increasing for the [REAL Act](#), which would also reinstate Pell eligibility for people in prison without restrictions.

Regardless of the legislative vehicle, Pell reinstatement is a commonsense reform grounded in an intrinsic value for all of us in the United States: every person should have equal access to opportunities that improve their lives and improve the future for their families.

Voters, business leaders, corrections officials, law enforcement, educators, state lawmakers, and many others understand this simple truth. We encourage lawmakers in Washington, DC on both sides of the aisle to show they agree by turning this support and momentum into action.

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