

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/i-didnt-care-about-voting-until-my-incarceration-showed-me-how-much-it-matters>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Growing up, politics wasn't at the top of the list of things I was interested in. My parents never discussed the importance of voting with me or my siblings, and it wasn't a priority among my peers either. We talked mainly about working drug corners or what hot new club we'd be attending later that evening.

When I was 18, I received a flyer in the mail about registering to vote. Without any thought, I instantly ripped the letter into shreds and tossed it into the trash bin. For many years, I dismissed the topics of politics and voting.

I was sentenced to life in the South Carolina Department of Corrections for murder at age 19, and it was during my incarceration that I realized just how important knowledge of politics is and how the power of voting can greatly impact the lives of many. I was listening to a conversation among other incarcerated people and overheard an older man talking to a group of younger men. I'll always remember when he said, Pay attention to who the president and the governor is. These two people are important, as they determine your treatment behind these walls. One guy asked, What's the importance of the governor? The elder man smiled and replied, The governor picks the prison director, and the prison director determines the change within the prison environment.

These changes can be monumental. For example, before the 1994 Crime Bill was passed, incarcerated people were eligible for Pell Grants to fund [college degrees](#), and there were also lots of programs focused on the rehabilitation of those incarcerated to mentally prepare them for their release back into the community. After the bill was passed, new mandatory minimums lengthened prison sentences; truth-in-sentencing laws required people convicted of criminal offenses to serve 85 percent of their sentences before becoming eligible for parole; and [three strikes laws](#) were implemented federally and in many states.

But many of the people these changes affected most directly—those who are incarcerated—were unable to vote for the leaders who would determine them.

I was granted parole in 2014, after serving 22 years and five months in prison. When I got out, I knew that I had to be the voice for those who were still in prison fighting for their rights. Because of [felony disenfranchisement laws in South Carolina](#), people who are incarcerated or on probation or parole are ineligible to vote. Being on lifetime parole, to effectively make a difference, I'd have to be pardoned—the only way to restore my right to vote—and I'd have to wait five years to apply.

While that time passed, I began organizing a community around voter education and the importance of being registered to vote. In 2018, I became the South Carolina statewide organizer at JustLeadershipUSA. My job consists of meeting with city and county councils about passing a [Ban the Box ordinance](#), which gives formerly incarcerated people the fair chance of being interviewed for jobs without being discriminated against because of their involvement in the criminal legal system.

I am proud to say I, too, can now personally participate in choosing leaders and changing laws in my community, state, and country. On September 17, 2020, after being on parole for six years, I was granted a pardon by the State of South Carolina, restoring my right to vote. This 2020 election will be my very first time exercising that right. Having a family and being personally familiar with the issues of criminal justice, I'm looking forward to casting my vote. I'm happy for the political insight given to me while being incarcerated that led me to value the right to vote. More now than ever, my voice matters and has to represent the voices still inside.

Lester Young is the South Carolina statewide organizer for JustLeadershipUSA. JustLeadershipUSA is dedicated to ending the 48,000 collateral consequences that act as barriers for those living with felony convictions.

Vera believes in using our platforms to elevate diverse voices and opinions, including those of people currently and formerly incarcerated. Other than Vera employees, contributors speak for themselves. Vera has not independently verified the statements made in this post.

NEWS

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.