

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/more-states-are-restoring-voting-rights-for-formerly-incarcerated-people-and-thats-a-very-good-thing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Update January 23, 2018: Today, the State of Floridaone of the most restrictive states in allowing people with felony convictions to regain the right to vote[moved one step closer to restoring rights to up to one million people](#). The Voting Restoration Amendment a proposed constitutional amendment that would automatically restore voting rights for most people convicted of nonviolent crimesreached the 766,200 signature threshold to be placed on the ballot in November.

This Election Day, Americans will go to the polls to cast their votes and make their voices heard. But not everyone will be able to vote.

Thousands of people who want to vote will be denied this right because of their criminal histories. While laws differ from state to state, an estimated 2.5 percent of Americans6.1 million votersare disenfranchised due to past felony convictions. In many states, this includes people who have served their time in prison, yet cant vote because they are still on probation or parole. In four statesFlorida, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Iowaregaining the right to vote is so onerous that formerly incarcerated people are essentially barred for life from exercising this civic right.

Some statesboth red and bluehave started to change this. If we care about reintegrating people who have been incarcerated into society, we should want more states to follow suit.

Stripping people of this basic right is not only bad for the people it affects and their communitiesits also bad for democracy. After all, democracy thrivesand surviveson participation.

In 2016, [Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe individually restored the rights](#) of around 13,000 formerly incarcerated peoplewith the goal of restoring thousands more before the end of his term. And, earlier this year, [Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed a law](#) restoring voting rights for thousands of people. Across the country, a total of 49 pieces of legislation were introduced in 16 states during last years legislative session to restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated people who have served their sentences.

There is even bipartisan support for reform at the federal level. [Republican Rand Paul](#)along with numerous Democratshas expressed support for restoring voting rights to people who are formerly incarcerated.

Not only is the restoration of voting rights a benefit to our democracy, it's also a benefit to those who are personally impacted. While community support is essential to a person's successful reentry after incarceration, this support isin large partdependent on a person's ability to engage in their community in the first place. One of the most essential ways this can happen is through the ballot box, giving a voice and agency to the person casting a vote. Voting also has the power to bind community members together as a shared civic experience.

Formerly incarcerated people already face significant hurdles to reentry, including difficulty finding employment, maintaining stable housing, and reestablishing connections with their families and communities. These barriers can exacerbate feelings of isolation, shame, and frustrationwhich in turn can lead to increased criminal activity.

Rather than compounding barriers to reentry, we must give formerly incarcerated people every opportunity to regain the community and family support necessary to succeed after their release. This is in everyone's interest, given that 95 percent of incarcerated people will eventually return home.

The right to vote is a fundamental tenet of democracy. Those who have paid their debt to society deserve the opportunity for a second chance and a chance to reintegrate as full participants in civic life.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.