**America's second-class citizens: Why more than six million Americans cannot vote**

More than six million Americans of voting age – that is one out of every 40 people of voting age in the country will be ineligible to vote in the upcoming elections.  
  
They are people who have been convicted of a felony, a crime typically punishable by more than a year in prison, and who, as a result, have had their voting rights taken away from them.

*"I feel like my voice doesn't matter, that I'm a second class citizen. I’ve paid a lot of taxes over the last decade but I can’t put a little ‘X’ in a box on a ballot because I once was convicted of a felony."* ***Anonymous, Kentucky, completed sentence 8 years ago***

**What is disenfranchisement?**

If you are convicted of a felony in the United States, chances are you will lose the right to vote.   
  
As the US has the largest prison population per capita in the world, this is thought to affect somewhere in the region of six million Americans. [http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/]  
  
These people are disenfranchised – barred from participating in the democracy that imprisoned them.

*"Being branded as a convicted felon has disconnected me from some important things like voting. Because I am a convicted felon, I have been left out to dry, and I’m not the only one."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

Each of the US’ 50 states make their own laws regarding the voting rights of felons and former felons.

**How many Americans are disenfranchised?**Roughly six million Americans of voting age. That is one out of every 40.

*"If we can't vote, we can't vote to change things, which means we are just gonna be silenced for the rest of our lives. There's no major political voice in my state, Kentucky, that has taken this up to do it. I'm just disheartened."****Anonymous, Kentucky, completed sentence 8 years ago***

With 1.5 million people who are ineligible to vote, the state of Florida is home to more than a quarter of the country’s disenfranchised. [http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/#II. Disenfranchisement in 2016]

The are other states that also stand out: Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia and Alabama.   
  
In all six, including Florida, more than seven percent of the voting age population is unable to vote.   
  
That percentage is even higher for African Americans.

**Different state, different law**

It is the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution that is responsible for the large differences in the number of disenfranchised people in each state.

This amendment allows each state to make its own laws regarding the voting rights of convicted felons.

*"I like to call myself a legal alien. I’m legally allowed to be here but I’m alienated because I’m set apart from everybody."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

Only two states allow all convicted felons to vote, including those who are currently imprisoned: Maine and Vermont.

Fourteen [do we have an exact number?] states allow those who are on probation and parole to vote, but not those who are in jail or prison.  
  
Most allow former felons to participate in the democratic process after they have served their sentence. [when you say probation or parole here, do you mean in addition to their sentence? 🡪 Yes. I have now clarified this]  
  
But there are twelve [let’s say the exact number and name them] states that effectively [is it effectively or actually? 🡪 Effectively. People can be granted a pardon to be put back into the process, but in reality this is hardly ever done. Added this at the end of the paragraph] ban convicted felons from voting for life [please check this edit – is this correct?] – even once they have served their sentence and been released. Although there are ways for ex-felons to be pardoned and allowed back into the democratic process, in reality this hardly ever happens.

*"A friend of mine, her dad is in his sixties. He got a felony when he was in his twenties, hasn’t been in trouble again, he owns several businesses and he hasn't been able to vote for what's best for him, his family and his business." –* ***Anonymous, Kentucky, completed sentence 8 years ago***

More than half of all those who are disenfranchised have already served their sentence and been released. [please add a link for this fact. why is this so high if we say that only a couple of states do this – is it because they are states with high rates? It’s important to mention which states they are so that this makes sense. Also, do any states impose this bar on voting for a limited period after release or are all those that have a bar after release for life? 🡪 this is explained with several infographics which shows how more than 50% of disenfranchised is post-sentence]  
  
*"When I go to renew my license, when I go to the county clerk, they always ask ‘would you like to register to vote?’ It’s embarrassing to say no, because a lot of people think ‘why would you say that?’ It’s embarrassing to answer that in public. It sounds like I don’t care about voting. I feel like the bottom of the barrel."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

**Does race play a role?**

Yes.  
  
While one out of every 40 Americans cannot vote because they have been convicted of a felony, this goes up to one out of every 13 when just the African American population is considered. [please add a link for this]

For Latinos, the figure is. [please add here, with a link 🡪 the data doesn’t specifically mention Latinos]

For white Americans, it is one in 25. [please add here, with a link]

Let’s add a quote from Black Lives Matter here

For some states, the racial disparity is even greater. In four states [let’s name them and add a link to support that fact🡪 see below], more than 20 percent – or one in every five – African Americans are ineligible to vote because they were once convicted of a felony.

[This is explained with infographic showing rates for African Americans]

*"I pay taxes, I’m held accountable when I commit a crime, so why can’t I vote? I should have all the rights as any other person has.”****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

**Why are so many Americans in prison?**

The US has about five percent of the global population. But it has 25 percent of the global prison population, as data from the International Centre for Prison Studies shows. [http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wppl\_10.pdf]

Since the 1980s, the number of inmates in the US has risen dramatically, from about 350.000 in 1980 to a peak of more than 1.5 million in 2008..[ http://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf]

*"I was convicted of a felony over 15 years ago and I’ve been living with that label for two decades now. Because I am a convicted felon, I have been left out to dry, and I’m not the only one."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

One of the causes of this is the ‘war on drugs’ and the harsh sentences handed out for relatively miner drug offences. [http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestoryus2012/2012/08/2012823103039675592.html 🡪 Is the US war on drugs racist?]

It has also been attributed to the high number of private prisons – or what has become known as the ‘Prison-Industrial Complex’. Between 1999 and 2010, the use of private prisons in the US increased by 40 percent at the state level and 784 percent in the federal prison system. [Link to: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201204051921-0022161>]

And as the number of prisoners has increased, so too has the number of Americans who are unable to vote in their country’s elections.

*"I believe there is a benefit to disenfranchising certain groups of people. When you take the power of voting away from a quarter of a million people in Kentucky alone, that’s a lot of votes. It's a way to keep control."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000*****Where do the presidential candidates stand on this?**  
Even though a large number of people cannot vote because of disenfranchisement laws, the issue hasn’t seen much attention during the presidential campaign, mainly because this is an issue that is decided on a state by state basis.

Hillary Clinton, however, has stated she is in favour of reforms that would allow more Americans convicted of a felony to vote. [Embed the tweet here]  
  
Donald Trump, on the other hand, has spoken out against reforms in Virginia, telling a campaign rally in Rhode Island: “They’re giving 200,000 people that have been convicted of heinous crimes, horrible crimes, the worst crimes, the right to vote. Because you know what? They know they’re going to vote Democrat.” [Link to this: <http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/government-politics/article_cff41b5a-a671-59a0-8549-d81bf4f17eb6.html>]

*"For ex-felons, a big problem is that they face a lot of other issues that take precedence over changing voting rights. They’re more concerned with where their next meal is gonna come from than their concern about whether they’re able to vote."****Mantell Stevens, 36, Kentucky, convicted of drug possession, spent 30 days in jail and three years on probation in 2000***

Please link to or embed this somewhere within this piece. It is from 2012 and looking at how voter disenfranchisement could affect the elections then. I’d suggest you write something like this as an intro to it or caption for it:  
  
This isn’t the first US election that may be impacted by voter disenfranchisement. Ahead of the 2012 vote, Al Jazeera’s Fault Lines examined accusations that new voting laws were disenfranchising communities of colour. Watch that here:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2012/04/20124312352119619.html>  
  
The following are also Fault Lines films about imprisonment that you may want to embed or link to within this piece:

Al Jazeera’s Fault Lines investigates the school to prison pipeline in the US. Watch it here:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2014/12/school-prison-pipeline-2014122914840265947.html>  
  
In this award-winning film, Al Jazeera’s Fault Lines tells the stories of young inmates in adult jails and examines their claims of physical and sexual abuse:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2015/09/forgotten-youth-america-prisons-150915093857683.html>

Are American courts failing the poor? In Lost in the System, Al Jazeera’s Fault Lines investigates the practice of pre-trial detentions in the US:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2015/10/lost-system-151012142419118.html>