



Restoration of Voting Rights “Unlock the Vote WI”

The right to vote is fundamental to our nation’s democracy and should be guaranteed to every citizen. Preventing people with previous criminal histories from voting contributes to the racial divide polarizing our country. More than two million African-Americans (almost 8 percent of black adults) are prevented from voting because of felony convictions, compared to just under 2 percent of non-African-American citizens. Punishment needs to fit the offense, and lengthy disenfranchisement is simply out of proportion for all but the most serious crimes. In 2016, the average length of stay for parole in Wisconsin was estimated at 38 months, or over 3 years, this is 1.7 times greater than the average across all states (22 months), ranking Wisconsin third nationally in terms of expected length of time people spend under parole supervision. [1] Fourteen states and the District of Columbia currently automatically allow people with previous criminal histories to register to vote after being released from jail or prison.

Felony Disenfranchisement

6.1 million Americans cannot vote because of a felony. Nearly 77% of these citizens are out of prison. Additionally, half are not in prison, on parole, or on probation. Felony disenfranchisement affects one of every 13 African Americans and one in every 56 non-black voters.

Wisconsin Felony Disenfranchisement

- Wisconsin bars people who are in prison, on probation, on parole, and/or on extended supervision from voting.
- As of 2019, there were 68,000 people under either probation or parole supervision in the state, just slightly over the population of Oshkosh, WI. Approximately 45,000 are on felony paper unable to vote.
- One out of every 9 African Americans are disenfranchised in comparison to one out of every 50 Wisconsin voters.

Policy Reforms

- As of July 2, 2019, over 23 states have implemented measures to expand voter eligibility, extending the right to vote to over 800,000 people. Florida is one of the most recent.

Argument for Restoring Voting Rights for Felons

- The Florida Parole Commission reports that “the overall three-year recidivism rate for all released inmates” was 33.1%, while the recidivism rate for released prisoners who were given their civil rights back was 11%.
- The Berkeley Law Journal concluded that “states which permanently disenfranchise people with previous criminal histories experience significantly higher repeat offense rates than states that do not.”

Advocacy Efforts

- Connecticut’s advocates tailored their arguments to the constituencies (the public and lawmakers) they were trying to persuade.

- Maryland’s advocates took advantage of a governmental study on felony disenfranchisement. They recruited a diverse advocacy coalition and developed arguments to ease legislators’ fears.
- Louisiana’s advocates used an appellate court ruling on a felony disenfranchisement law as a focusing event. They built a coalition of public figures (Saints players), nonprofits, and Republican and Democratic politicians, and they proposed a moderate, first-step policy.

Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Wisconsin

- In 2009, the Brennan Center worked with the Wisconsin ACLU, the Wisconsin League of Women Voters, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Equality Wisconsin, Institute for One Wisconsin, the American Probation and Parole Association, Disability Rights Wisconsin, State Rep. Tamara Grigsby, and Senator Lena Taylor to propose the Wisconsin Democracy Restoration Act to restore voting rights to people on probation and parole. It passed out of committee but failed in the legislature.
- 2019 – WI legislators are working with WISDOM/EXPO, the ACLU of WI, Project Return, Wisconsin Voices, Justified Anger (Madison) and Just Leadership USA to propose “The Unlock the Vote” Act to restore voting rights to people on probation and parole. The Unlock the Vote Campaign seeks to reengage 68,000 disenfranchised voters throughout WI.

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Never Lose Right to Vote	Lost Only While Incarcerated Automatic Restoration After Release	Lost Until Completion of Sentence (Parole and/or Probation Automatic Restoration After	Lost Until Completion of Sentence In Some States a Post-Sentencing Waiting Period Additional Action Required for Restoration (1)
Maine	District of Columbia	Alaska	Alabama
Vermont	Hawaii	Arkansas	Arizona
	Illinois	California (2)	Delaware
	Indiana	Colorado	Iowa
	Maryland (3)	Connecticut	Kentucky
	Massachusetts	Florida(4)	Mississippi
	Michigan	Georgia	Nebraska
	Montana	Idaho	Nevada
	New Hampshire	Kansas	Tennessee
	North Dakota	Louisiana	Virginia
	Ohio	Minnesota	Wisconsin
	Oregon	Missouri	Wyoming
	Pennsylvania	New Jersey	
	Rhode Island	New Mexico	
	Utah	New York (5)	
		North Carolina	
		Oklahoma	
		South Carolina	
		South Dakota	
		Texas	
		Washington	
		West Virginia	

