

BLACK VOTES SUPPRESSED ACROSS THE COUNTRY BY DISENFRANCHISING OF PRISONERS AND FORMER CONVICTS

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ATLANTA-When men and woman are incarcerated for crimes, the jail and prison time is meant to be their penance. But in many states, prisoners and former inmates find that another severe penalty awaits – disenfranchisement.

For decades, America has struggled with how to reintegrate prisoners back into society. As the inmate population has exploded, so has that challenge. Clearly, the stigma of being an ex-convict impacts their ability to gain acceptance in their communities, and makes it difficult to find a job. But should these men and woman also lose their right to vote, which is such a fundamental part of our society?

Moreover, with African Americans comprising half of the nation’s prison population, yet only 12 % of the general public, disenfranchising felons has emerged as a modern version of the Jim Crow era’s poll tax – an effective way to suppress black votes.

When a handful of votes and Supreme Court intervention decided the presidency in 2000, it underscored the importance of everyone’s vote. But about six million people can’t vote today because of state laws restricting the voting rights of former convicts. In 2000, nearly 4.7 million Americans were ineligible to vote, by 2004 the number rose to 5.3 million and it continues to climb.

A large number of disenfranchised former convicts reside in four southern states – Alabama, Florida, Kentucky and Virginia. In those states alone, nearly 1.5 million people are prevented from voting. To put that number in perspective, it is roughly the same number of people whose votes weren’t counted because of faulty voting machines in the shenanigans surrounding the 2000 presidential election.

America’s discrimination against former inmates is unique in the world. Most other Western democracies have national voting standards, rather than leaving it to states or provinces; other countries also don’t restrict voting for men and woman who have served their prison time. By contrast in America, there are 35 states prohibiting felons from voting while they are on parole; 30 states preventing felony probationers from voting; and 14 states precluding former felons who have completed their sentence from voting.

The state laws are so varied that from jurisdiction to jurisdiction there is no consistency on what convictions will trigger a loss of voting rights. Only 1.4 million of the people disenfranchised in 2004 were actually behind bars. The rest were living in communities, trying to re-establish their lives on parole, probation or after completing their sentence.

With race playing such a significant role in the criminal justice process, this added penalty is another blow to black communities. Data shows that blacks are prosecuted more often than whites who commit similar crimes, and blacks are offered less attractive plea bargains, leaving large numbers of disenfranchised men and women. By taking away their voting power, it weakens the clout of black communities not only on election day, but every time the communities advocate for policy changes.

Even more troubling is evidence that the laws governing the restricting of voting rights to former inmates have been manipulated specifically as part of a pattern to suppress the votes of African Americans. Throughout the south, several states have revised their constitutions and criminal codes to target minorities by linking voting restrictions to crimes committed predominantly by blacks. Amazingly, in some states the most hideous crimes, such as robbery and murder, are excluded from disenfranchisement.

Thus far, Congress has steadfastly refused to address this injustice, while legal avenues have produced little success. Proving to the courts that the state laws establishing disenfranchisement constitute intentional discrimination against blacks has been a difficult hurdle to overcome.

The burden falls upon communities to push their local legislators to advocate for reinstating voting rights to prisoners and those formerly incarcerated, especially the non-violent offenders. Moreover, the states must also establish simple procedures for restoring the voting rights, so that people from poor communities won't be intimidated. These men and women encounter many physical and mental health challenges as they reunite with their families and communities after serving prison and jail time; stress, depression and loss of self-esteem create tremendous barriers to their overall health and wellbeing. The added blow of losing their right to express themselves through voting is yet another hurdle that must be overcome.

This is America in 2007, long past the days of slavery and Jim Crow. Such blatant discrimination against blacks should not be allowed to persist, and it will fall upon our communities to push state governments to correct this grave wrong.

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