

Millions of Ex-Offenders Given a Voting ‘Death Sentence’

Written by Freddie Allen, NNPA DC
Thursday, 02 August 2012 15:13



Nearly 6 million former prisoners –1 million of them Black – will not be able to vote in the November presidential election because of state laws that continue to punish them even after they have completed their sentences, according to a recent report by the Sentencing Project.

The report said 5.85 million citizens who were formerly incarcerated will be prevented from voting. That's five times the entire population of Rhode Island and more than the adult population (18-65 years old) of Virginia.

“The most telling indicator of citizenship in the United States is that ability to cast a vote,” stated Desmond Meade, president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, a non-profit group focused on restoring the civil rights of ex-offenders. “If you don’t have a voice you might as well be a slave.”

He explained, “Everyday a person is being disenfranchised in the minority community that weakens that community’s political voice.”

Eleven states disenfranchise ex-offenders after they have completed their sentences: Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, Tennessee, Virginia and Wyoming. Those 11 states account for 45 percent of the entire disenfranchised population.

The report also found that Blacks lose their right to vote at a rate that is four times higher than

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non-Blacks. If the presidential election were held today, more than 20 percent of Blacks living in Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia wouldn't be able to vote.

Meade, a Florida native, served a prison sentence from 2001-2004 for multiple crimes, the most serious being an ex-felon in possession of a firearm. He won't be able to vote in this year's presidential election and maybe the next, because Florida has some of the toughest felon disenfranchisement laws on the books. Meade said that Florida's disenfranchisement laws basically amount to a lifetime ban from the polling booth for many ex-offenders.

According to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, in Florida, an ex-felon automatically loses his or her civil rights and must apply to have those rights restored through the Board of Executive Clemency. That board consists of the governor, attorney general, chief financial officer and commissioner of agriculture and consumer services.

The governor and two cabinet members must sign an executive order for an ex-felon to ultimately have his or her rights restored. Advocates such as Meade liken the ban to a lifetime ban, because of the arduous process it takes for citizens to have their rights restored once they've been taken away.

Disenfranchisement laws first rose to prominence shortly after the passage of the 15th amendment in 1870 that outlawed disenfranchisement based on race and past enslavement. But southern states with large Black populations found ways to circumvent the constitution.

Georgia, for example, passed the poll tax in 1871 that limited voter turnout among Blacks and poor Whites. By 1904 every state in the Deep South had amended their state constitution to limit Black voter participation.

“In some respects, disenfranchisement policies go back to the time of the founding of the country; the country was founded as a great experiment in democracy — of course it was a very limited experiment,” said Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project.

The Sentencing Project was one of the first groups in the late 1990s to study the impact of the

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disenfranchisement restrictions facing citizens flowing through the criminal justice pipeline. Once the information from the studies started getting out, momentum to change the laws began to build.

In 2007, Maryland lifted the lifetime voting ban on ex-felons and Maine and Vermont allow prisoners to vote. In Iowa, however, Republican Governor Terry Branstad overturned an executive order that restored voting rights to ex-felons, an executive order signed into law by the former Governor [now Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture] Tom Vilsack, a Democrat. Florida’s Republican Governor Rick Scott reinstated a five-year waiting period for non-violent ex-offenders before they could apply to regain their voting privileges.

For more information, on voting rights call the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law hotline 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683) Monday-Friday 9am-5pm EST. {comments on}