

Millions of ex-offenders given a voting 'Death Sentence'

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – 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 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.

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“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 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.

Courtney Stewart, chairman of The Reentry Network for Returning Citizen, said that many ex-offenders don’t understand the voting process and how crucial the right to vote is when it comes to reclaiming their rights.

“United States is about politics,” said Stewart “So we have to get involved in the political process. If you’re saying that you’re a returning citizen and you want your citizenship and you want all of your rights returned to you, the best thing that you can do is [vote].”

The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens assists ex-offenders in their transition back into their communities.

Public opinion polls show that many Americans agree that reformed citizens deserve to have their rights restored. Christopher Uggen, a criminologist at the University of Minnesota and one of the researchers that worked on The Sentencing Project report, found that 80 percent of those polled favored restoring voting rights for ex-felons, and 60 percent agreed that probationers and parolees should also have the right to vote. Support for voting rights dropped below 50 percent for those still imprisoned.

“As a criminologist that has studied this issue for many years, I’m not used to seeing such strong support for doing anything for a convicted felon,” Uggen said. “It reminded me of how dear the right to vote is and how close to core it is for most Americans.”

Those who work in the field are keeping a close eye on North Carolina, where Gov. Bev Perdue signed a law in July that allows adults who have committed nonviolent felonies or misdemeanors to have their records expunged after 15 years if they haven’t since committed any offenses more serious than traffic violations.

“What I tell all my returning citizens, even though you might not be able to vote come this November, what you can do is find people to vote for you,” said Desmond Meade of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition. “That’s what you do and that’s a much more powerful vote. If you

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can't vote [yourself], take five people to the polls and that's how you can empower yourself, that's how you can make a difference, and that's how we can come together and actually make a change."