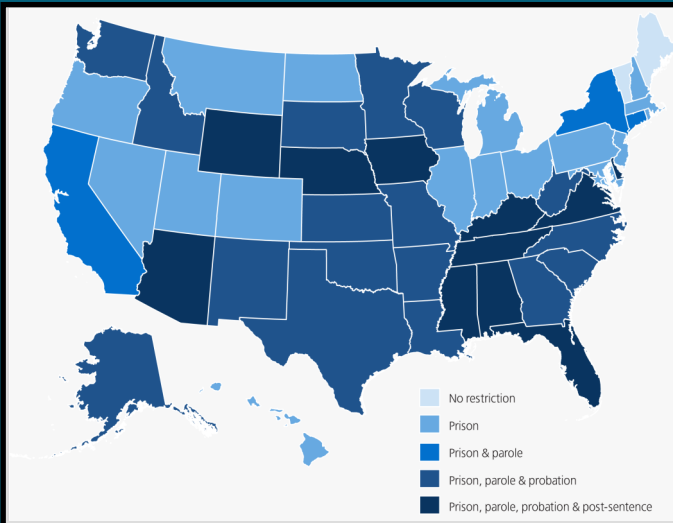


# VOTING IS POWER

The restoration of voting rights to convicted felons is a process that has historically discriminated against people of color. It is important for the government to support all Americans equally, and to assist former felons in regaining their rights to vote. These are members of our communities; people working, paying taxes, and raising families alongside the rest of us. Given that the U.S. has also been condemned by the UN Human Rights Committee for our allowance of states to ban former felons from voting. It is clearly time for change<sup>1</sup>.

## WHAT IS FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT?

Felony disenfranchisement is the practice of barring individuals who have been convicted of felony crimes from voting in political elections. Many believe that once felons get out of jail they are never able to vote again; in reality, disenfranchisement laws differ by state. Current federal policies allow states to autonomously create the laws regarding the restoration of felons' rights<sup>2</sup>. Sadly, most of these processes are so lengthy that few people can take advantage of them. People of color, who have higher rates of disenfranchisement compared to their presence in the voting-age population, are disproportionately affected. This leads to a decreased ability to be politically involved, blocks them from having descriptive representation and, thereby, limits access to political power.<sup>3</sup>

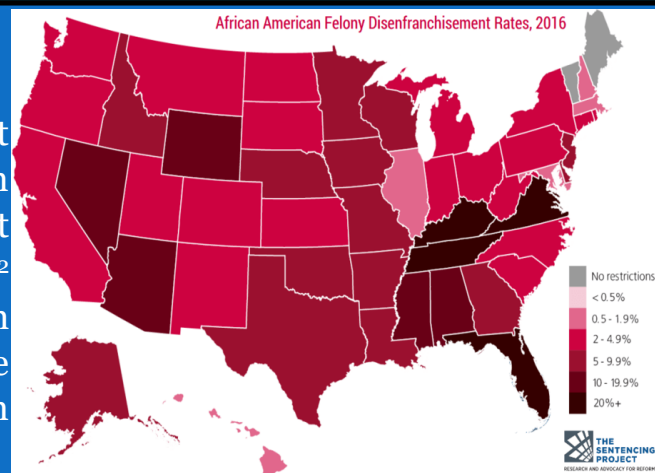


## Who is affected?

More than 6 million (1 in every 40) adults in the United States have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction. This issue is important because it affects at least 676,730 women, 585,355 military veterans, and 2 million+ people who have already completed the entirety of their sentences in our country.<sup>3</sup> Each state gets to individually decide how the voting rights restoration of convicted felons works, including the severity of punishment and all requirements. This map shows felon voting restrictions from none (lightest color) to most severe (darkest color) in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

## DOES IT LEAD TO DISCRIMINATION?

This map displays African American disenfranchisement rates by severity: from none (lightest color) to more than 20% (darkest color).<sup>4</sup> The 13% average disenfranchisement rate for African Americans is 7 times the national average.<sup>2</sup> Since they are convicted of felonies and imprisoned at much higher levels, it is easy to see how black communities are disproportionately affected by these policies and kept from voting at higher rates which is unfair **and** unconstitutional.<sup>7</sup>



# THE STATE OF FLORIDA: A CASE STUDY

Florida previously had one of the most punitive disenfranchisement policies in the U.S. All citizens with past felony convictions were permanently disenfranchised and required to appeal to the governor's clemency board for restoration of rights.<sup>9</sup> On Nov. 6, 2018, Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment (Amendment 4) to automatically restore the right to vote to 1.4 million individuals with felony convictions in their pasts—excluding individuals convicted of murder or felony sexual offenses.<sup>6</sup> Information about the amendment follows:

- The petition to get Amendment 4 on the 2018 ballot, sponsored by Florida Second Chances, surpassed the 766,200 signature threshold needed.<sup>8</sup>
- The amendment had bipartisan voter support and passed by more than 60%.<sup>8</sup>
- Retroactively, SB7066 was passed in the Florida legislature on May 3, 2019 and redefined term of sentence to “include monetary obligations even after a court has determined that they should be converted from criminal penalties to civil liens.”<sup>5</sup>
- This law restricted the eligibility of some Floridians who had been re-enfranchised by Amendment 4 by requiring them to pay all owed money; a modern-day poll tax.<sup>5</sup>
- Many Floridians opposed the law because it ignores the will of Florida voters, creates administratively unworkable carve-outs, and conflicts with the text of Amendment 4.<sup>9</sup>

This shows that although a majority of Floridians is in favor of the immediate restoration of voting rights to former felons, many lawmakers are determined to continue suppressing voices of this majority-minority group.<sup>10</sup> Assuming that felons will vote liberally, lawmakers who want to maintain control in the state work to make voting an exclusionary privilege that is hard to access.<sup>13</sup> This unconstitutional trend is being replicated across the U.S. and with the closeness of elections today, every vote matters. Felons are unfairly being denied their voting power.<sup>11</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

American citizens, as a whole, widely support the immediate restoration of voting rights to formerly convicted individuals. States are moving to restore voting rights to citizens with felony convictions.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the country, there is significant momentum for reform of disenfranchisement policies, such as the recent movement seen in the state of Florida.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. is the only democracy in the world that disenfranchises people who have completed their sentences. The solution that seems to have worked in many other nations, such as Canada, Sweden, and Switzerland, as well as several states is to allow felons who have served their entire sentences to vote.<sup>3</sup>

As a global leader, and a modern example of an industrialized nation, the United States must remain at the forefront of progress and implement the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee.<sup>1</sup> Those who have served their debt to society should automatically regain their rights to vote and the U.S. should adopt “appropriate measures to ensure that states restore voting rights to citizens who have fully served their sentences and those who have been released on parole.”

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