



Denying the right to vote

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There are thousands of people who are eligible to vote but who might not get to exercise that right unless New York State sets the record straight on voter rights.

In the state and throughout the country, people lose the right to vote when they are incarcerated for a felony conviction or on parole for a felony conviction. But the wide misperception is that the right to vote disappears forever.

Voting rights are restored for convicted persons in New York once they have served their maximum sentence or been discharged from parole. People with felony convictions are also not saddled with extra document requirements. They only need to complete a registration form and sign an affidavit, like others.

But confusion about eligibility persists and has been fueled by misinformation. A 2006 survey by the Brennan Center for Justice, DEMOS and the Legal Action Center showed that some Board of Elections (BOE) offices in New York City and surrounding counties were denying people on probation their legal right to vote or demanding documents from people with criminal convictions.

Those are illegal practices. They weigh more heavily on African Americans and Hispanics from New York City, which has high shares of the state's population on probation, parole and serving time. As the Community Service Society notes, state agencies perform well at notifying each other of a person's ineligibility to vote but not of their entitlement.

Advocates have made several smart recommendations—including that the state's Board of Elections launch a public awareness campaign and that the legislature restore the right to vote for all citizens on release from prison. These recommendations should be fast tracked, and Attorney General Andrew Cuomo should put BOE offices on notice for any attempts to lock out voters.