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While we're on the subject of "Change..."

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While millions of American engage in a spirited presidential primary, more than 122,000 New Yorkers will be barred from voting in this year's election based solely on a felony conviction. Nowhere is our shortcoming in the struggle for advancing civil rights more salient than in our willingness to cling to New York's archaic felon voter disenfranchisement laws, which disproportionately bar low-income black and Hispanic voters from full participation in our democracy. Additionally, election officials have repeatedly failed to comply with *existing* felony disenfranchisement laws, leading to the de facto disenfranchisement of thousands more eligible minority voters. The Governor of New York can eradicate one of the last relics of our ugly, racist past by issuing an Executive Order to extend voting rights to *all* New Yorkers who are not in prison.

In our state, individuals lose the right to vote if they are convicted of a felony and sentenced to serve time in prison, but they automatically regain the right once they have served the maximum prison sentence or have been discharged from parole. A person can vote if s/he is on probation, if convicted of only a misdemeanor, or if in jail awaiting trial. However, approximately half of New York's county election boards illegally prevent probationers from voting or improperly ask for special documentation from ex-offenders before allowing them to register, according to surveys conducted by the Brennan Center in 2003 and 2005. Additionally, many formerly incarcerated people stay away from the polls because they are confused by the law and mistakenly believe they have lost their right to vote permanently.

Because partisan politics have stymied legislative efforts at reform, The Governor of New York should utilize his executive authority to act where the Legislature has failed to do so. In July 2005, Iowa Governor Thomas Vilsack issued an Executive Order restoring the vote to approximately 80,000 Iowans with felony convictions. When challenged, Iowa courts upheld the executive order as being within the Governor's right. By automatically restoring voting rights to people who have been released from prison and are living in the community, the Governor can enhance New York's democratic system, ease the administrative burden that currently leads to confusion and misinformation, promote broad public safety and future crime prevention, and establish a fair voting process that includes all citizens who have served their prison time.