

RESEARCH BRIEF

Voter Registration and Turnout Among Probationers and Parolees in Rhode Island

2008 election cycle was first in which RI felons on probation/parole could vote since 19th century.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Of 17,606 probationers and parolees re-enfranchised since 2006:¹
 - 6,330 registered to vote in time for the general election on November 4, 2008;
 - 3,001 voted in one or more of the three statewide elections in 2008 (the presidential preference primary, the statewide primary, and/or the general election).

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

- In 2006, Rhode Island voters approved, by referendum, an amendment to the state constitution, extending voting rights to all individuals on probation or parole for a felony. As a result, disenfranchisement in Rhode Island is now limited to the time period during which an individual is incarcerated for a felony.
- Approval of the amendment triggered legislation, known as the Rhode Island Restoration of Voting Rights Act (RIRVRA), which established implementation responsibilities for the RI Department of Corrections (DOC) and the RI Office of the Secretary of State (SOS).²
- Since then, the Rhode Island Family Life Center (FLC), a non-profit agency that provides both services and advocacy to the formerly incarcerated, has cooperated with the DOC and SOS to register probationers and parolees and to help state agencies fulfill their responsibilities under RIRVRA.

FULFILLING THE REQUIREMENTS OF RIRVRA

- The major institutional changes implemented by the DOC and SOS under RIRVRA were as follows:³
 - The DOC now acts as a voter registration agency, and offers all inmates the opportunity to register to vote during their discharge;
 - The DOC shares with the SOS, on a monthly basis, lists of individuals who have lost or regained their voting rights, and the SOS uses this information to update the Statewide Central Voter Registry System;
 - The SOS notified the judiciary and other state offices of the change in the law;
 - The SOS updated relevant websites and literature.

¹ RI has more than 17,606 felony probationers and parolees, but we could accurately search voter registration information for only 17,606. See “Complete Numerical Results and Methodology.”

² RIRVRA is contained in the RI General Laws, Section 17-9.2.

³ Section 17-9.2-3 enumerates specific responsibilities for state agencies.

ELEMENTS OF THE VOTER ENGAGEMENT EFFORT

- In order to educate and register probationers and parolees, the FLC conducted a voter engagement project, the major elements of which were as follows:
 - The FLC posted volunteers at probation and parole offices throughout the state to register voters.
 - The FLC funded two mailings:
 - In July 2008, the FLC sent a mailing that included a letter from the SOS and the same literature produced and used by the FLC for in-person outreach. This mailing went to a list, provided by the DOC, of 7,500 felony probationers and parolees.
 - In October 2008, the FLC sent a second mailing to over 17,000 felony probationers and parolees—nearly all disenfranchised felons in the state.⁴ The mailing reminded those already registered that the election was approaching and informed those not registered that Rhode Island permits same-day registration in certain locations.
 - The FLC did extensive outreach to other non-profits that engage with probationers and parolees, including homeless shelters, drug treatment facilities and supportive housing organizations.
 - The FLC sought earned media around the issue and funded an advertising campaign on local radio stations.

COMPLETE NUMERICAL RESULTS AND METHODOLOGY

- Using both algorithms and manual techniques FLC staff matched a file containing the list of RI felony probationers and parolees to the state's voter file.⁵ Of the 17,606 individuals we were able to analyze, 6,330 were registered to vote (i.e., they were on both the probation/parole list and the voter file).
- We then examined the voter history (available with the voter file) of these 6,330 individuals, and found the following:
 - 2,893 voted in the general election on November 4, 2008;
 - 221 voted in the statewide primary on September 9, 2008;
 - 641 voted in the presidential preference primary on March 4, 2008;
 - There were 3001 unique voters (individuals that voted in one or more election);
 - 463 took advantage of Rhode Island's same-day registration provision by registering on Election Day.

⁴ The following were eliminated from our mailing list: individuals without an address, individuals for whom our previous mailing had been returned and individuals no longer residing in RI.

⁵ Matches were done on the basis of a combination of name, birth date and address. Matching criteria were designed to accommodate name changes. However, matches could not be attempted for individuals lacking both a birth date and an address. Furthermore, our probation/parole "snapshot" was from mid-August 2008, about ten weeks before the general election, so individuals released between the date of the snapshot and the election were also excluded from analysis. Likewise, individuals who were re-incarcerated for a felony between the date of the snapshot and the election were erroneously included in our analysis. Based on usual rates of turnover in the probation/parole population and the number of individuals lacking adequate information for matches, we estimate that our sample of 17,606 individuals was missing about 200 individuals who were on felony probation or parole on election day, and it falsely included about 50 individuals who may have been in prison for a felony on election day.