



Thursday, August 27, 2009

**INSTITUTE FOR ONE WISCONSIN TESTIMONY
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON CORRECTIONS AND THE COURTS**

Committee Members:

My name is Scot Ross and I am the executive director of the Institute for One Wisconsin. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of legislation which will restore voting rights to ex-offenders who are still on parole or probation for felony offenses.

At the Institute for One Wisconsin, a progressive non-partisan, non-profit, we are committed to ensuring Wisconsinites have unfettered access to that most sacred right – the right to vote. We host a website www.ProtectWisconsinsVote.org and this fall we will host the second annual Protect Wisconsin's Vote Education Summit.

We are taught from childhood it is our civil duty, our responsibility, to participate in this grand experiment of self-governance – most importantly, by casting our ballot in the voting booth. Stated simply, I cannot understand why we would discourage an ex-offender from fully-reintegrating into society. The more an ex-offender is invested in his or her community, the more likely he or she will not re-offend. The more isolated and ostracized an ex-offender is, the more likely he or she will re-offend. Does anyone disagree that the more invested an ex-offender becomes in his or her community, the less likely he or she is to re-offend?

So, what's the point?

Our "tough on crime" laws have created much longer out-of-prison supervisions. For years, perhaps decades, a Wisconsinite may live in the community after release from prison, have a job, pay the bills, meet family obligations, but be denied the right to vote. Some for life.

Get out of prison.

Get a job

Pay your bills.

Pay your taxes.

Be a good citizen.

But don't vote – or we'll put you back in prison.

So, what's the point?

This makes no sense – unless there is a political motivation behind denying the right to vote to members of the population. Wisconsin has an estimated **38,000 citizens** who are currently living in our communities who remain disenfranchised.

So, committee members ask yourself this question about denying ex-offenders the right to vote when they are released from prison: What's the point?

I think we can all agree, the threat of losing one's franchise is absolutely no deterrence prior to someone committing a felony. The disenfranchisement that continues once a felon still on parole or probation is



unwarranted and it's to our detriment as a people. Our society is not weakened, it is strengthened by increased voter participation – and in this instance, the punishment won't stop the crime. What possible societal good comes from denying ex-offenders who we are reintegrating into society the right to vote?

So, what's the point?

Regrettably, this is one of the lingering remains of the racism of this country's immediate past.

Our state's focus on punishment instead of prevention has filled Wisconsin's prisons. From 1990 to 2000, corrections spending in Wisconsin increased 550 percent – more than double the second-ranking state.

And our prisons are disproportionately filled with young, African American men. Wisconsin's African American population is six percent. African Americans make up 50 percent of our prison population.

So, what's the point?

Felony disenfranchisement is simply another form of discrimination and racism. In spite of a number of collective triumphs to right the wrongs inflicted by whites against non-whites, when it comes to voting rights, as a state, we are forgetting, and worse ignoring, the struggle African Americans have had beyond all others in attempting to exercise the sacred right to vote in the United States.

Literacy tests.

Poll taxes.

Grandfather clauses.

Whites-only primaries.

What's the point?

All of these noxious prohibitions were created specifically to dehumanize and negate the citizenship of African Americans. These laws were in response to changing American law which no longer allowed African Americans to be characterized as property, as 3/5ths of a human being. How can we see this disenfranchisement as nothing less than a modern negation of citizenship?

If we truly believe in our bill of rights and the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against "excessive' sanctions," then continuing to take away this most the basic tenet of liberty from a population so disproportionately incarcerated can only be seen for the ugly truth.

You might find it as ironic as I do that the extremely rare instances of ex-felons who have not been reinfranchised improperly voting is among the biggest weapons used by some to claim the need for restrictive voter ID laws and an end to same day voter registration. Laws that would restrict the right to vote, that target urban areas of the state where a majority of the state's African-American population live.

Is this the point?

I thank the committee for its time and its willingness to consider ending this un-American, un-democratic law.