

**LETTER IN SUPPORT OF
THE DEMOCRACY RESTORATION ACT (H.R. 3335 / S. 1516)
FROM CIVIL RIGHTS AND OTHER ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS**

December 10, 2009

Dear Member of Congress:

We, the undersigned organizations, a coalition of civil rights, social and criminal justice, and other legal and advocacy organizations, are writing to urge your support and co-sponsorship of the Democracy Restoration Act of 2009 (H.R. 3335/S. 1516), a bill that seeks to restore voting rights in federal elections to people who are out of prison and living in the community. The current patchwork of laws that disenfranchise people with criminal records has created an inconsistent and unfair federal electoral process, perpetuating entrenched racial discrimination. As organizations dedicated to promoting democracy and justice as well as equal rights for all Americans, we strongly support passage of this legislation.

Currently, 5.3 million American citizens are denied the right to vote because they have a criminal conviction in their past. Four million of these people are out of prison, living in the community, paying taxes and raising families, yet they remain disenfranchised for years, often decades, and sometimes for life. The United States is one of the few western democratic nations that exclude such large numbers of people from the democratic process. Congressional action is needed to restore voting rights in federal elections to the millions of Americans who have been released from incarceration, but continue to be denied their ability to fully participate in civic life. Fortunately, Senator Russell Feingold and Representative John Conyers will soon introduce the Democracy Restoration Act of 2009 which is intended to address these injustices.

Felony disenfranchisement laws are rooted in the Jim Crow era. They were enacted alongside poll taxes and literacy tests and were intended to keep African Americans from voting. By 1900, 38 states denied voting rights to people with criminal convictions, most of which disenfranchised people until they received a pardon. The intended effects of these laws continue to this day. Nationwide, 13% of African-American men have lost the right to vote. If current incarceration rates continue, three in ten of the next generation of African-American men will lose the right to vote at some point in their lifetimes. This racial disparity also impacts the families of those who are disenfranchised and the communities in which they reside by diminishing their collective political voice.

In this country voting is a national symbol of political equality and full citizenship. When a citizen is denied this right and responsibility, their standing as a full and equal member of our society is called into question. The responsibilities of citizenship – working, paying taxes and contributing to one's community – are duties conferred upon those reentering society. Further punishing individuals who are in the community by denying them a right of citizenship counters the expectation that citizens have rehabilitated themselves after a conviction. The United States

should not be a country where the effects of past mistakes have countless consequences and no opportunity for renewal.

Passage of the Democracy Restoration Act of 2009 will ensure that all Americans living in the community will have the opportunity to participate in our electoral process. A strong, vibrant democracy requires the broadest possible base of voter participation and allowing all persons who have completed their prison time to vote is the best way to ensure the greatest level of participation.

We urge you to support the passage of the Democracy Restoration Act of 2009.

If you have any questions, please contact Deborah J. Vagins of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office at (202)715-0816 or dvagins@dcaclu.org or Erika Wood of the Brennan Center for Justice at (212) 992-8638.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Justice

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

American Friends Service Committee

American Humanist Association

Americans for Safe Access

Asian American Justice Center

A Better Way Foundation

ACORN

Black Youth Vote!

Brennan Center for Justice

Campaign for America's Future

Campaign for Youth Justice

Center for the Study of the American Electorate

Citizens Against Recidivism, Inc.

Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism

Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action

Drug Policy Alliance

Faces & Voices of Recovery

Fair Elections Legal Network

FairVote

FedCURE
Felony Entertainment
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Interfaith Drug Policy Initiative
International CURE
Justice Policy Institute
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leadership Conference for Civil Rights
Legal Action Center
Maryland CURE
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
NAACP
National Alliance of Faith and Justice
National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
NOVA Coalition
Penal Reform International
People Advocating Recovery
People for the American Way
Pennsylvania Prison Society
Project Vote
Rehabilitation Through the Arts
Rhode Island Family Life Center
Roosevelt University's Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy
Safe Streets Arts Foundation
Southern Coalition for Social Justice
The Fortune Society
The National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
The Partnership for Safety and Justice
The Real Cost of Prisons Project
The Sentencing Project

The Voter Enfranchisement Project of The Bronx Defenders

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

U.S. Dream Academy, Inc.

V.O.T.E. (Voice of the Ex-offender)