

**LETTER IN SUPPORT OF
THE DEMOCRACY RESTORATION ACT
FROM CIVIL RIGHTS AND REFORM ORGANIZATIONS**

December 16, 2011

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 2011, 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 disfranchise 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 disfranchised for years, often decades, and sometimes for life. The United States is one of the few western democratic nations that excludes 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 Ben Cardin and Representative John Conyers are lead sponsors of the Democracy Restoration Act of 2011, which is intended to address these injustices.

Criminal disfranchisement 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 disfranchised 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 disfranchised 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, his or her 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. To further punish individuals who are back 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 redress.

Passage of the Democracy Restoration Act of 2011 will ensure that all Americans living in their communities 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 2011.

If you have any questions, please contact Deborah J. Vagins of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office at (202) 675-2335 or dvagins@dcaclu.org or Nicole Austin-Hillery of the Brennan Center for Justice at (202) 249-7191 or nicole.austin-hillery@nyu.edu.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union

APIA Vote

Brennan Center for Justice

Center for the Study of the American Electorate

CitiWide Harm Reduction

Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism

Crossroad Bible Institute

Demos

Desiree Alliance

Drug Policy Alliance

Drug Policy Forum of Hawaii

Fair Elections Legal Network

The Fortune Society's David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy

Illinois Consortium on Drug Policy

International CURE

Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

Lawyers' Committee For Civil Rights Under Law

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Maryland CURE

NAACP

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.

New Mexico Women's Justice Project

A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing)

North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition

NORML

The Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA)

ProjectVote

Queers for Economic Justice

South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)

State Rep. Edward J. Orlett (Ret) -Ohio

StoptheDrugWar.org

The Sentencing Project

Women With A Vision, Inc.