

**LETTER IN SUPPORT OF
THE DEMOCRACY RESTORATION ACT (S. 772/ H.R. 1459)
FROM CIVIL RIGHTS AND REFORM ORGANIZATIONS**

March 25, 2015

Dear Member of Congress:

During this year commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Bloody Sunday March for voting rights in Selma, Alabama and the passage of the historic Voting Rights Act, 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 a bill that is also critical to voting rights in America -- the Democracy Restoration Act of 2015. This bill 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 disfranchises 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, 5.85 million American citizens are denied the right to vote because they have a criminal conviction in their past. 4.4 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. The Democracy Restoration Act of 2015, introduced by Senator Ben Cardin and Representative John Conyers, is intended to address these injustices.

Criminal disfranchisement laws proliferated during the Jim Crow era, and were enacted alongside poll taxes and literacy tests and with the intent of keeping 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, one in 13 African Americans 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 issue also impacts Latino communities given their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. 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 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 2015.

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

Sincerely,

AFL-CIO
African American Ministers In Action
American Civil Liberties Union
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Bend the Arc Jewish Action
Brennan Center for Justice
Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism
Common Cause
Communication Workers of America
CURE
DC Vote
Demos
Drug Policy Alliance
Fair Elections Legal Network
FairVote
FedCURE
Global Alliance Interfaith Networks
International CURE
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
League of United Latin American Citizens
MALDEF
NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc.
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
National Association of Social Workers

National Council of Jewish Women
National Urban League
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
OurTime.org
People Demanding Action
People For the American Way
Prison Policy Initiative
Project Vote
The Sentencing Project
Voting Rights Forward