

April 19, 2021

The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
509 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Broad Coalition Supports the Democracy Restoration Act, S. 481

Dear Senator Cardin:

We are writing to express our enthusiastic support for the Democracy Restoration Act (DRA/S.481). Our coalition of national, regional, and local civil rights and social justice organizations believes that the DRA is a critical part of advancing civil rights. We all agree that it is crucial that the Senate act swiftly to restore voting rights in federal elections nationwide to everyone living in the community.

Felony disenfranchisement laws affect more than five million people in the United States today: a number larger than the combined population of the six smallest states. These laws perpetuate racial inequality, serve no legitimate law enforcement purpose, deny second chances, and create confusing standards that harm our democracy. That is why passage of the DRA is so important.

Promoting Racial Justice

Many felony disenfranchisement laws are rooted in the period after the Civil War and ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, when states looked for new ways to prevent Black people from voting and enforce white supremacy. This racist legacy lives on today: felony disenfranchisement laws affect Black, Latino, and Indigenous people at disproportionately high rates. As our nation struggles to grapple with racial injustice, and we are regularly reminded of how far we have to go, the DRA is an important step in the right direction.

Encouraging Healthy Reintegration

Laws that disenfranchise people as they return to their communities send them the message that they are not truly welcome and cut off opportunities for healthy civic engagement. On the other hand, studies have found that voting and civic engagement promote healthy reintegration. That is why criminal justice reform organizations, law enforcement, and corrections officials agree that we should give people returning to our communities the right to vote.

Providing Second Chances

The DRA would finally put an end to permanent disenfranchisement in federal elections and provide people with the second chances that we all deserve. Many states have made tremendous progress in voting rights restoration in recent years through legislation, executive action, and ballot initiatives. This progress has often been the product of bipartisan support that reflects how universal the belief in forgiveness is. But there are still 11 states that impose a lifetime ban on

voting for at least some people with convictions. It is long past time to put an end to this unforgiving policy.

Ending Confusion with a National Standard

Currently, the voting rights of people with convictions vary depending on the states where they live, the offenses they were convicted of, and even the fines and fees that they owe. This variation confuses voters and election officials alike. The result is that even people who are legally eligible miss out on the opportunity to vote. Enacting the DRA would create a simple rule for federal elections that is easy to administer and, in turn, promote trust in elections.

Thank you so much for your continuing advocacy on this issue and sponsorship of the DRA for the past ten years. We look forward to working with you to get it passed.

Sincerely,

Advancement Project National Office

Alliance of Families for Justice

American Association of People with Disabilities

American Civil Liberties Union

Anti-Defamation League

Arizona Advocacy Network (AZAN)

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC

Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law

Brooklyn Voters Alliance

Center for Employment Opportunities

Citizen Action of New York

Citizen Action of New York, Rochester Chapter

Civic Nebraska

The Civics Center

Civil Survival Project

College and Community Fellowship

Color of Change

CURE (Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants)

Democracy 21

Democracy for All Florida

Demos

Drug Policy Alliance

End Citizens United / Let America Vote Action Fund

Florida Rising

Fix Democracy First

Fuse Washington

The Gamaliel Network

Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda

Greater NYC for Change

Health in Justice Action Lab

LatinoJustice PRLDEF

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

League of Conservation Voters

League of Women Voters of Florida

Life for Pot

A Little Piece of Light

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF)

National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

National Association of Social Workers

National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)

National Haitian Elected Officials Network

National Urban League

Native American Rights Fund

New Jersey Institute for Social Justice

New York Democratic Lawyers Council

New York Immigration Coalition

Operation Restoration

People for the American Way

People Over Profits

Poder LatinX

Progressive Turnout Project

Protect Democracy

Public Wise

Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU)

Seattle / King County Coalition on Homelessness

The Sentencing Project

Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) Action Fund

Stand Up America

State Voices

StoptheDrugWar.org

Texas Progressive Action Network

Transformative Justice Coalition

United Auto Workers Region 9A

Voting Rights Lab

Washington Statewide Reentry Council

The Workers Circle