

April 19, 2021

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

Re: Law Enforcement, Probation, Parole, and Corrections Officials Support the Democracy
Restoration Act, S. 481

Dear Senator Cardin:

As current and former law enforcement, probation, parole, and corrections officials from 34 states and the District of Columbia, we are writing to express our enthusiastic support for the Democracy Restoration Act (DRA/S.481). Drawing on decades of experience protecting and serving our communities, we believe that disenfranchising individuals after release from prison is an ineffective policy that violates our nation's democracy and undermines public safety.

Felony disenfranchisement laws affect millions of people in the United States today. These laws are unduly punitive, discourage healthy reintegration into society, and perpetuate racism in the criminal justice system. Simply put, felony disenfranchisement is not consistent with our country's values. It is crucial for the Senate to act swiftly in support of the DRA to restore the right to vote for the formerly incarcerated in federal elections.

Reversing Unduly Punitive Policies

There is no credible evidence that felony disenfranchisement does anything to reduce crime. In fact, it might do the opposite by working against the positive, long-term prospects of community reintegration. Denying the right to vote to millions of our fellow citizens serves no legitimate purpose: it is unduly punitive and does not improve public safety. Above all, it sends the harmful message that people released from prison are not welcome and have no stake in their communities. Exclusion is not the answer to creating safer communities. Once the criminal justice system has determined that a person has paid their debt to society and can safely return to their communities, they should return with the basic rights and responsibilities that accompany citizenship.

Encouraging Healthy Reintegration

Rather than excluding millions of Americans from participating in democracy, we should help our fellow citizens rebuild their lives when they return home. As members of law enforcement, we know firsthand that people who are accepted as valuable members of their local communities and made to feel that their voices matter are much more likely to lead productive and crime-free lives. Studies have found that voting and civic engagement promote healthy reintegration into the community, which is correlated with reduced tendencies to commit crime and lower rates of recidivism.¹ Restoring voting rights also led to greater trust in the government and criminal justice system, improved views of the government as being more fair and representative, and an

increased willingness to cooperate with law enforcement, which is critical to our ability to solve serious and violent crime.² One study has even found consistent differences between voters and non-voters in rates of subsequent arrest and incarceration after being released from prison.³ The DRA is essential for improving re-entry outcomes, making our communities safer, and reducing recidivism. Restoring the right to vote is simply good law enforcement policy.

Fighting Racism in the Criminal Justice System

Many felony disenfranchisement laws disproportionately harm Black and Latino people, who make up the majority of citizens returning from prison.⁴ Our nation has struggled to grapple with racial injustice for centuries, and last summer’s events have illustrated that we have a long way to go before achieving racial equity. As members of the law enforcement and corrections community, we have a critical role to play in dismantling systemic racism in this country, which must include advocating for common-sense legislation like the DRA. Individuals who have paid their debts to society must be given the chance to engage in democracy and lead productive lives.

Thank you so much for your continuing advocacy on this issue. We look forward to seeing the DRA become law.

Sincerely,

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¹ Guy Padraic Hamilton-Smith and Matt Vogel, *The Violence of Voicelessness: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement on Recidivism*, 22 La Raza L.J. 407 (2015). Available at <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Felony-Disenfranchisement.pdf>

² Victoria Shineman, *Restoring Rights, Restoring Trust: Evidence that Reversing Felony Disenfranchisement Penalties Increases Both Trust and Cooperation with Government* (October 25, 2018). Available <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3272694>; Council on State Governments, *Advance Violent Crime Reduction Efforts by Improving Trust and Cooperation between Communities and the Police*, 50 State Report on public Safety, <https://50statespublicsafety.us/part-1/strategy-4/action-item-2/>.

³ Christopher Uggen and Jeff Manza *Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample*, 36 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 193 (2004). Available at <https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/voting-and-subsequent-crime-and-arrest-evidence-from-a-community->

⁴ Chris Uggen et al, *Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction*, Sentencing Project (Oct. 20, 2020), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>.