



# **Women Silenced at the Polls**

## **How Criminal Convictions Deny the Right to Vote**



**THE  
SENTENCING  
PROJECT**



# Women Silenced at the Polls: How Criminal Convictions Deny the Right to Vote

**This policy brief was authored by Senior Research Analyst Kristen M. Budd, Ph.D. and Research Fellow Vianney Gomez.**

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To our ancestors: We honor and thank the diverse coalitions of Black, Indigenous, Latina, Asian American, and white suffragists who fought for women's voting rights. They organized, advocated, marched, and endured incarceration to secure women's rightful place in the American electorate. Your legacy will not be forgotten.

Expressions of gratitude: The authors are grateful to the six women who shared their life stories and voting rights journey with us. They provided critical insights about felony disenfranchisement and the importance of voting rights for women involved, past or present, in the criminal legal system. The authors are also grateful to Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Kara Gotsch, and Nicole D. Porter for their valuable insights and feedback on this policy brief. We appreciate Jill Bailin for her copyediting work to make the writing in this report that much stronger.

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# OVERVIEW

**In a true democracy, every adult citizen has the right to vote. But, as the United States celebrated the 250th anniversary of its founding, almost three-quarters of a million American women were banned from voting because they had a felony-level conviction.<sup>1</sup> Most of these women completed their sentences of community supervision or incarceration. In addition, women who retain the right to vote in most jails nationwide and in certain states' prison systems struggle to exercise that right.**

For nearly 100 years, diverse groups of women, as well as individual trailblazers, fought for equal voting rights, culminating in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 then made voting a true reality for many, but not all, women of color. Today, the battle for women's equal access to the ballot box continues. Laws associating criminal convictions with voting qualifications have a long history in this country, and they disproportionately impact people of color.<sup>2</sup>

In this policy brief, The Sentencing Project highlights six women – in California, Florida, Kentucky, Maine, Texas, and Virginia – who share their stories about voting and how their involvement in the criminal legal system affects their right to vote.<sup>3</sup> For these women, voting restrictions, including access to the ballot, became a measure of their belonging in this country: Who is a full citizen in the United States? Whose voice counts during elections? Today, the work to ensure equal citizenship and voting rights for all women continues.

**An estimated 764,000 women are banned from voting due to a felony-level conviction.**

# INTRODUCTION

**Almost three-quarters of a million American women are barred from voting in elections.<sup>4</sup> These women, U.S. citizens, are disqualified from voting, because state laws or policies remove them from the electorate based on a single defining characteristic: a felony-level conviction. The growth in the number of women who cannot vote today is intricately linked to the growth of women’s involvement within the criminal legal system.<sup>5</sup> Over the last four decades, the number of women under U.S. correctional supervision has increased by over 160% – from roughly 388,000 women in 1985 to over 1 million women in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Racial disparities in imprisonment continue to exacerbate disparities in who is banned from voting. While disparities in incarceration have decreased, Black women remain roughly twice as likely to experience imprisonment as white women, and Latina women have slightly higher imprisonment rates compared to white women.<sup>7</sup>**

| Women Under Control of the U.S. Corrections Systems, 1985 vs. 2023 |         |           |                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|--------------------------|
|                                                                    | 1985    | 2023      | % Increase 1985 vs. 2023 |
| Jail                                                               | 19,077  | 95,100    | 399%                     |
| Parole                                                             | 18,098  | 81,647    | 351%                     |
| Prison                                                             | 23,126  | 91,144    | 294%                     |
| Probation                                                          | 327,360 | 744,811   | 128%                     |
| Total                                                              | 387,661 | 1,012,695 | 161%                     |

Source: Hester, T. (1987). *Correctional populations in the United States 1985*. Bureau of Justice Statistics; Napal, D., Budd, K. M., & Rovner, J. (2025). *Incarcerated women and girls*. The Sentencing Project.

Overreliance on the criminal legal system fails to address women’s needs, including mental health care, substance use treatment, and trauma-informed support.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the growing number of women within the criminal legal system has made one thing clear: a felony-level conviction strips women, the nation’s largest voting bloc, of their choices on how limited resources are allocated to these critical issues. By taking away women’s access to the ballot, these restrictions also suppress perspectives from a broad range of political affiliations and ultimately weaken the diversity of voices that are essential to a representative and functioning democracy.<sup>9</sup>

The exclusion of women from the ballot box is not new. Although the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 enshrined women’s right to vote in the U.S. Constitution, it did not end efforts to restrict women’s access to the ballot. In the U.S. Supreme Court case *Leser v. Garnett* (1922), Oscar Leser, a Maryland resident who opposed women’s suffrage, unsuccessfully challenged the 19th Amendment, partly on the grounds that it infringed upon state sovereignty. In a 9-0 decision, the Supreme Court upheld the 19th Amendment’s validity and guaranteed women’s right to vote would be enforced nationwide.<sup>10</sup> Despite this monumental win for suffrage, women of color faced ongoing voter suppression tactics.<sup>11</sup> Decades later, it was the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that made voting a true reality for many, but not all, women of color. Progress toward equal ballot access has been undermined by the nation’s approach to tying one’s right to vote with felony-level criminal convictions.

Compared with many other nations, the United States is an outlier for its limits on the right to vote for people who have criminal convictions.<sup>12</sup> Women's accounts of having their voting rights taken away or restricted by the state are powerful examples of how felony disenfranchisement further weakens an already "flawed democracy" – a classification the United States earned based on the Democracy Index from The Economist Group.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, racism, sexism, and class bias, along with other structural inequalities, have long influenced women's treatment in the United States. Stripping women of their access to the ballot based on their criminal legal

status further diminishes women's political power and deepens these structural inequalities. When certain groups of American women are systematically carved out of the voting process, they lose the power to elect leaders who shape their lives and communities. How, then, can the United States claim to be a democracy? The battle to protect the 19th Amendment – to keep its fundamental principles alive and well – continues so that every eligible woman, regardless of criminal legal status, can vote.

## Key Terms

### **Felony disenfranchisement:**

Explicit loss of one's voting rights mandated by law or policy due to a felony-level conviction. With the exception of residents of Maine, Vermont, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico, women convicted of a felony will lose their right to vote either temporarily or permanently.

### **De facto disenfranchisement:**

A person who retains their right to vote but is prevented from voting by logistical, administrative, economic, or social barriers. This includes voting from a prison or jail as well as voting in the community.

# THE SCOPE OF WOMEN'S DISENFRANCHISEMENT

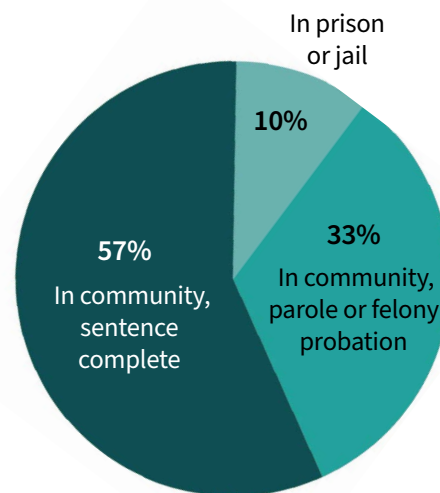
Over 760,000 women could not vote because of a felony-level conviction – a conservative estimate from The Sentencing Project's 2024 *Locked Out* report.<sup>14</sup>

Three broad categories of state-level restrictions dictate when women will be stripped of their right to vote due to a felony-level conviction: (1) during their incarceration in a prison or jail; (2) during community supervision (felony probation or parole); or (3) after completion of their sentence. An astounding 90% of women who cannot vote are living in the community, with the majority having completed their entire sentence.

Another subset of women will retain their voting rights even when sentenced or charged with a crime, but struggle to exercise them. For a felony-level conviction, women who have established residency in Maine, Vermont, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico prior to incarceration retain their right to vote. Women in jails nationwide who are pre-trial (not yet convicted) retain their right to vote. In the majority of states, women completing a jail sentence for a misdemeanor conviction will also retain their right to vote.<sup>15</sup> Yet for these incarcerated women, exercising that right can be extremely difficult. Most correctional facilities lack adequate voting infrastructure, and eligible voters may also face misinformation about their voting status, limited access to registration materials, and little or no information about candidates and elections.<sup>16</sup>

## Women Banned from Voting by Location, 2024 Felony-Level Sentences

*Disenfranchised population: 764,000 women*



Source: Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

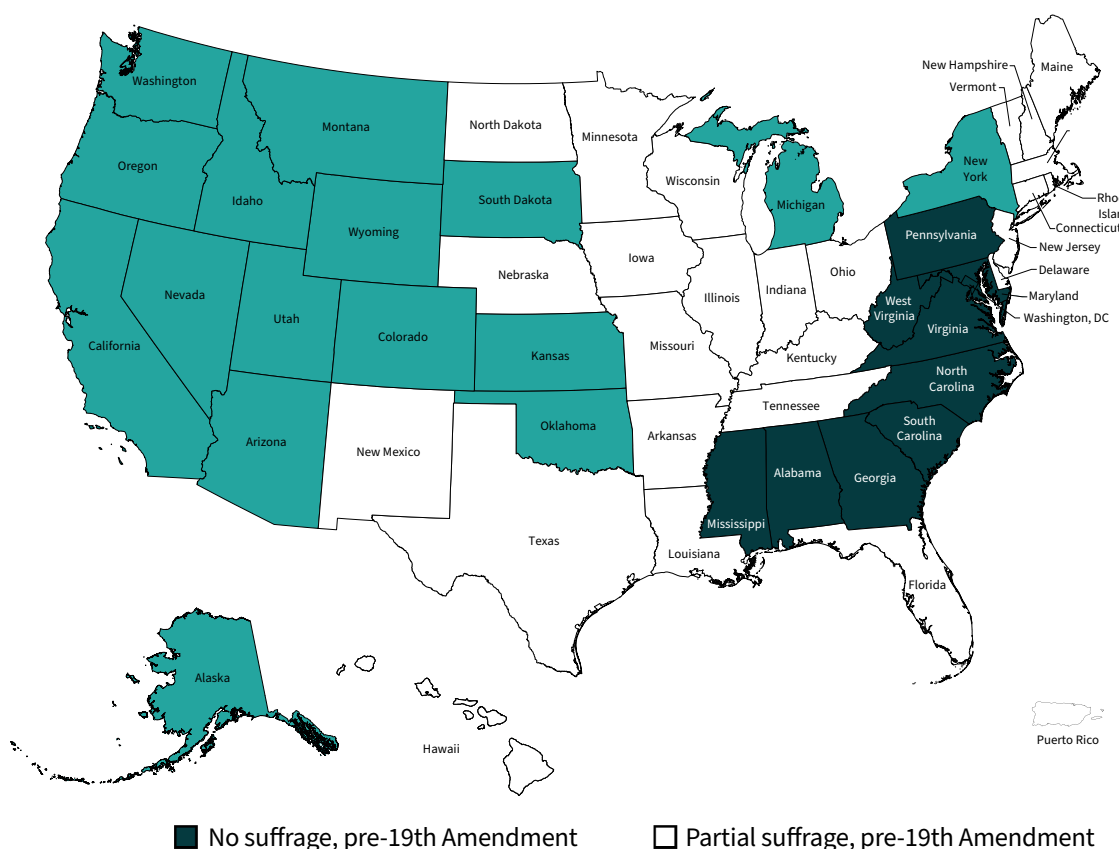
These disenfranchised women are our neighbors, co-workers, and fellow community members.<sup>17</sup> They are someone's daughter or granddaughter. They are also often someone's parent. Over half of women in prisons are mothers.<sup>18</sup> Evidence suggests the number of women in jails who are mothers is even higher.<sup>19</sup> However, these women cannot participate in electing the representatives who will ultimately make decisions, policy, and law that will shape their lives and experiences as well as those of their family.

# HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS: WOMEN'S UNEVEN ACCESS TO THE BALLOT

**“The vote is the emblem of your equality, women of America, the guarantee of your liberty... Women have suffered agony of soul which you never can comprehend, that you and your daughters might inherit political freedom. That vote has been costly. Prize it!”<sup>20</sup>**

**— Carrie Chapman Catt, 1920**

## Women's Voting Rights Pre-19th Amendment



| Full suffrage, pre-19th | Year |
|-------------------------|------|
| Alaska                  | 1913 |
| Arizona                 | 1912 |
| California              | 1911 |
| Colorado                | 1893 |
| Idaho                   | 1896 |
| Kansas                  | 1912 |
| Michigan                | 1918 |
| Montana                 | 1914 |
| Nevada                  | 1914 |
| New York                | 1917 |
| Oklahoma                | 1918 |
| Oregon                  | 1912 |
| South Dakota            | 1918 |
| Utah                    | 1870 |
| Washington              | 1910 |
| Wyoming                 | 1869 |

Source: Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. (n.d.). [A history of women's suffrage](#) [Interactive exhibition].

The inclusion of all women in the U.S. electorate was a long process shaped by both gender and race. Before the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women's voting rights expanded unevenly at the state level. Some jurisdictions granted women partial or full suffrage before the 19th Amendment was enacted by the U.S. Congress

and state legislatures. Other jurisdictions restricted or revoked women's right to vote, as was the case in New Jersey, the Utah Territory, and the Washington Territory.<sup>21</sup> Florida, Virginia, and many other Southern states did not extend any voting rights to women pre-19th Amendment.

Although the 19th Amendment represented a major expansion of women's political rights, it did not guarantee equal access to the ballot. Black women in the South faced discriminatory registration procedures, intimidation, and racial violence through the intersectional legacy of "Jane Crow."<sup>22</sup> Similar and distinct discrimination shaped the political exclusion of other women of color.<sup>23</sup> Latina women also faced barriers involving language access, literacy tests, and citizenship challenges.<sup>24</sup> Native American women confronted federal citizenship restrictions and state laws that denied voting rights even after the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.<sup>25</sup> Asian immigrant women were affected by racial restrictions on naturalization,<sup>26</sup> which would not be rectified until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 represented the most significant federal response to the continued exclusion of people of color. By prohibiting literacy tests and authorizing federal oversight of jurisdictions that had histories of voter discrimination, it substantially expanded political access for Black voters, including Black women. Subsequent amendments extended language-access protections to certain Spanish-speaking, Native American, Alaska Native, and Asian American

communities.<sup>28</sup> While the Voting Rights Act of 1965 removed race-based and gender-based barriers to the ballot, it did not eliminate disenfranchisement based on criminal convictions. Such restrictions existed before the Civil War, but Southern states expanded and redesigned these laws during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. During the post-Reconstruction period, many Southern states further tailored their disenfranchisement laws to exclude Black voters, allowing conviction-based voting restrictions to serve as a compelling form of political exclusion.<sup>29</sup>

Black women, like Black men, remained subject to state laws and constitutional provisions that disproportionately targeted Black citizens and removed their voting rights following a felony-level conviction.<sup>30</sup> These alleged "race-neutral" laws helped preserve the political power of white men, and their effects intensified with the expansion of the criminal legal system and mass incarceration.<sup>31</sup> Because Black and Latino communities experience disproportionate rates of arrest, conviction, incarceration, parole, and probation, felony-based voting restrictions continue to produce unequal consequences for different groups.<sup>32</sup>

# WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN U.S. ELECTIONS

Following the nearly century-long campaign and political fight to add the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, women have wielded the power of the vote.<sup>33</sup> Election cycle after election cycle, women “show up and show out” to register and to vote, making them a powerful political force in the United States. In every presidential election since 1980, women have surpassed men in the number and proportion of registered voters and those who cast a ballot.<sup>34</sup> In 2024, an estimated 91.3 million women were registered voters and 81.5 million women reported voting.<sup>35</sup> This trend in women’s higher level of voter turnout is seen across most racial and ethnic groups. Black, Latina, and white women voters consistently exceed the number of Black, Latino, and white males who vote.<sup>36</sup> In recent elections, Asian women have also joined this trend.<sup>37</sup>

Women have shaped democracy, not only through voting, but also through organizing, protest, and advocacy. They have led efforts to change laws and policies that affect their lives and communities. Women, including those impacted by the criminal legal system, have continued to fight for universal voting rights and equality for women nationwide.<sup>38</sup> Despite these efforts, many women continue to have their political agency suppressed when they are subjected to felony-based voting restrictions. This diminishes meaningful political participation and amplifies racial, gender, and economic inequalities.

## Blocked from Voting Post-Sentence: Experiences in Florida, Virginia, and Kentucky

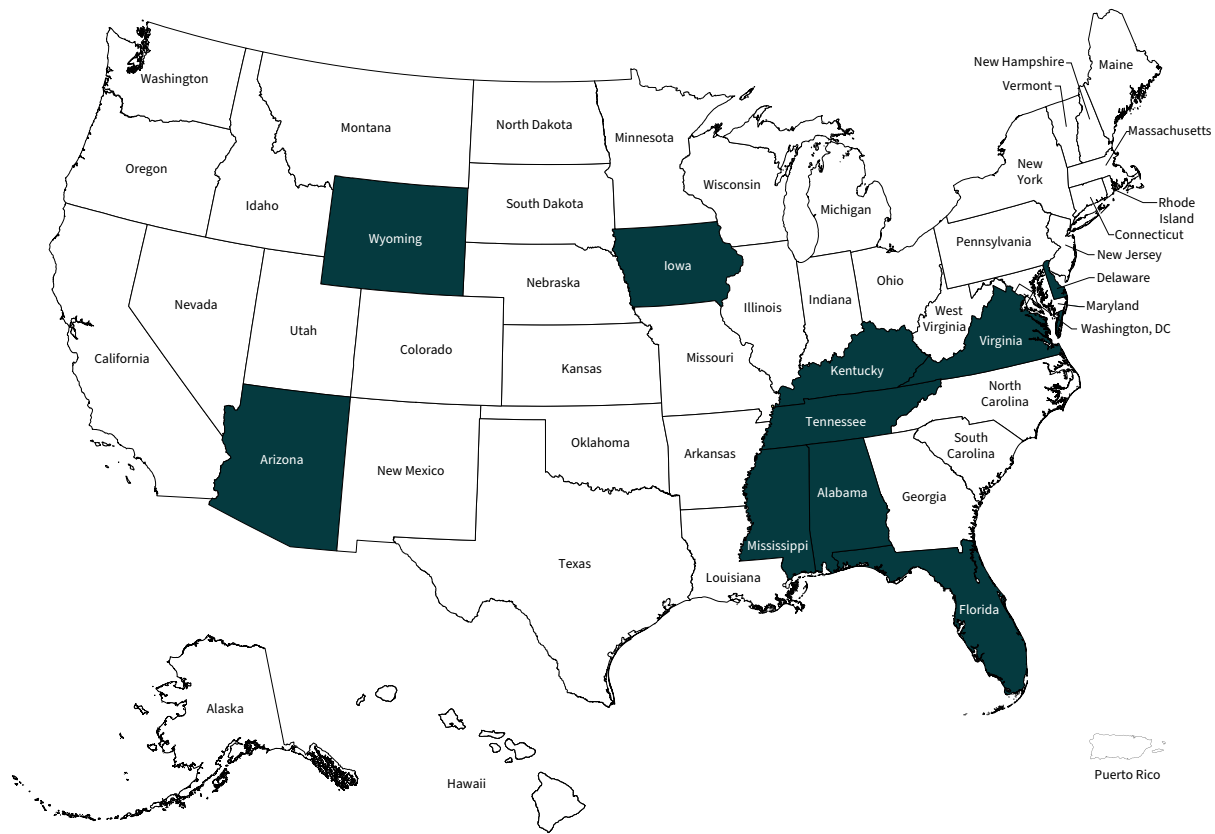
In 2024, over 432,000 women living in 10 states were stripped of their right to vote after they had completed their sentence for a felony-level conviction. In seven of these states, over 1% of the female voting-eligible population were banned from voting: Tennessee (4%), Alabama (2.8%), Kentucky (2.7%), Florida (2.6%), Virginia (1.9%), Arizona (1.7%), and Mississippi (1.2%).<sup>39</sup>

To regain their voting rights, these women must meet onerous requirements. These requirements include paying or providing evidence of a payment plan to zero out court-ordered fees, fines, or restitution (i.e., legal financial obligations), complying with child support orders, completing a post-sentence waiting period, or even receiving executive approval from a governor.<sup>40</sup>

| Proportion of Eligible Adult Population Who Reported Voting, by Gender and Race or Ethnicity, 2024 Presidential Election |           |         |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|----------------|
| Racial or Ethnic Identity                                                                                                | Women (%) | Men (%) | Gender Gap (%) |
| White (non-Latino)                                                                                                       | 72        | 69      | 3              |
| Black                                                                                                                    | 63        | 56      | 7              |
| Asian American                                                                                                           | 58        | 56      | 2              |
| Latina or Latino                                                                                                         | 53        | 48      | 5              |

Source: Center for American Women and Politics. (2026). *Gender differences in voter registration and turnout*. Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University–New Brunswick.

## States with Felony Voting Restrictions After Sentence Completion, 2024



Source: Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

### Florida

Florida, where over 180,000 women were disenfranchised post-sentence in 2024, illustrates how poverty and social inequality derail voting rights restoration for many.<sup>41</sup> A 2018 ballot referendum – Amendment 4 – restored the voting rights of Floridians who completed sentences for most felony-level convictions and any associated felony probation or parole.<sup>42</sup> Amendment 4 passed with almost 65% of Florida voters saying “yes.” The Florida legislature then circumvented the will of the people by passing Senate Bill 7066, requiring full payment of restitution, or any fines or fees resulting from a conviction.<sup>43</sup> Voting rights restoration became conditioned on being able to pay.

Laws requiring people to pay off legal financial obligations in order to regain the right to vote are the most evident parallel to Jim Crow and Jane Crow laws, specifically the poll taxes that had deliberately targeted people of color and the poorest citizens. These present-day poll taxes are particularly harmful to women. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ most recent survey of imprisoned people illuminates the factors that shaped their economic instability. In their youth, prior to the age of 18, a substantial minority of all imprisoned women (16%-19%) experienced living in a foster or group home, a specialized facility, or income-based housing.<sup>44</sup> Over 40% reported that their parents were enrolled in a state assistance program during their youth.<sup>45</sup> In their adulthood, they reported family incarceration, experiences of homelessness, and lack of education.

| Sociodemographics of Women Imprisoned in State or Federal Prisons, 2016 |                                      |                                 |                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                                                                         | Family Member Incarcerated, Lifetime | Less than a High School Diploma | Homeless in Year Prior to Arrest |
| All Imprisoned Women                                                    | 72%                                  | 52%                             | 20%                              |
| Latina Women                                                            | 74%                                  | 61%                             | 19%                              |
| Black Women                                                             | 71%                                  | 57%                             | 16%                              |
| White Women                                                             | 69%                                  | 46%                             | 20%                              |

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). [Survey of prison inmates data analysis tool \(SPI DAT\): Custom charts](#).

These lived experiences create cumulative disadvantages for women over time. Upon return to communities, women will encounter employment barriers and wage penalties due to their prior imprisonment.<sup>46</sup> Women who are required to fulfill legal financial obligations before they can vote often lack the financial means to pay off these additional monetary sanctions, as other pressing needs take priority – their children, housing, food, and transportation. Therefore, having one’s voting rights restored could take years, decades, or perhaps an entire lifetime – particularly if states are charging late fees and interest on legal financial obligations.<sup>47</sup>

## Recently re-enfranchised in Florida

**“Because someone is poor – that should not be a reason that they can’t vote.”**

### Important voting rights issues:

Human rights

Youth justice

Addressing the incarceration of women and girls

Mental health and rehabilitation

Voting rights

Women's rights

**A mother’s motivation to fight for her voting rights.** Returning home after a felony-level conviction was a drastic life change for Amari, age 49, who was imprisoned from 2010 until 2014. As she put it, “The cards were stacked against me all the way around coming out of prison.” Employment was nearly impossible to find. “The only job I was able to get was working at a hotel making \$3.91 per room... Everywhere I went [individual employers] wouldn’t hire me. Only hotels.” Housing was equally out of reach. “I have five kids. I’m a mother, and it was just...I couldn’t do anything.” Her trajectory shifted at an employee workshop, where she crossed paths with someone who had been in prison with her. That connection led Amari to begin attending coalition meetings with other formerly incarcerated women. “By being involved there, I learned that [voting] was something I needed to be able to do to get out of the situation that I was in and to help others.” She realized that to improve life circumstances for justice-impacted people, “You gotta vote to make these laws change.” Amari’s spark to fight for her and others’ voting rights was rooted in the dire circumstances she faced as she tried to survive and provide for her children.

**Working for the passage of Amendment 4.** Amari’s participation in the women’s coalition coincided with a broader push by multiple nonprofits to place Amendment 4 on Florida’s 2018 ballot. She was part of a network of justice-impacted people who “started with papers going around getting signatures until [they] ended up getting enough signatures to get Amendment 4 on the ballot.” Amari’s advocacy and grassroots work did not end there. She also described working for a nonprofit organization called Hard Knocks: “We were going around knocking on doors [encouraging] people to vote and letting them know that I am a person affected [by Florida’s felony disenfranchisement law]. I spoke to so many people...and I think going around to the doors – that person-to-person contact – really made a difference.” In November 2018, Amendment 4 passed with almost 65% support among Florida voters restoring Amari’s voting rights.

**Amendment 4 backlash and the revival of a present-day poll tax.** However, even after Amendment 4 passed, Amari shared, “I was able to vote [for] a couple years, and then [the legislature] came back and said, ‘If you haven’t paid your fines or fees, your [voting] rights – you can’t vote.’” Amari received a letter that stripped her voting rights once again due to unpaid fees. Voting would lead to her prosecution, the letter said. Amari’s reaction: “I didn’t vote anymore, and I was scared about it.” She watched the news as justice-impacted people were being arrested in Florida for voting even after state actors told them they were eligible. Her new voting rights obstacle was that she “needed to get the fees paid.” She “didn’t have the money to get the fees paid.” At that time, a nonprofit was helping people pay off their court fees. Amari applied for assistance. This was a

multi-year process, but her fine was eventually paid. In a cruel twist, Amari revealed, “[the nonprofit] told me that I still owe for late fees and interest!”

**The broken debt collector machine and poverty penalties.** Amari was shocked. “I’m like, late fees and interest? Are you kidding me? Why would they charge that on there?” It also caused a great deal of confusion. Even with the fees paid, Amari said, “I didn’t know for sure if I can vote.” She set out to figure out how much she owed in late fees and interest. “It’s such a hard process. No one can tell you over the phone. You have to literally go [to the courthouse] to find out. Who wants to come somewhere where they’ve been traumatized to pay [late fees and interest that] I don’t think I should have to pay you.” Moreover, “Each courthouse has their own process, which is like nothing or nonexistent, but you’re telling me I have to pay all this but you can’t tell me [over the phone what I owe]. It’s like a big runaround.” Amari “feel[s] like this deters so many people from voting, and [the government is] doing it on purpose.”

**Missed opportunities to vote and views on felony disenfranchisement.** With additional help, Amari recently obtained a notarized letter from the State Attorney’s Office stating that she is now able to vote. When she found out, she thought, “‘Finally, yes!’ because it has been such a long process.” But this did not take away the sting of missed opportunities to vote in prior elections, particularly the last presidential election. As for felony disenfranchisement, Amari said, “I don’t understand why voting should have anything to do with [a] record, especially if you’re out living in the community... Their voices should still be heard.” She emphasized how not having your right to vote ostracizes people from their communities – “forcing people to be [alienated], like we’re not even part of society” – and Florida makes it very difficult for people to get their voting rights restored, especially when they have to pay money. As for the more than 760,000 women who cannot vote due to these laws and policies, Amari emphasized that “It’s hurting the community. Nine times out of 10, they’re mothers or may be expecting. Healthcare, they can’t vote on that. They can’t vote about schools with their kids.” She wants lawmakers and elected officials to know that “We are good women. We deserve that right, because it feels like we’re being forced to be alienated. We’re U.S. citizens. Why can’t we have a say about what’s affecting us?”

**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** In a true democracy, Amari says policymakers need to rethink voting laws and allow every person to vote. When everyone has the right to vote, “it’ll make the community better. It’ll make the city better. It’ll make the world better, in my opinion.” Not only does felony disenfranchisement make people feel like they are not welcome in their communities, it stifles voices that are inherently critical, because “people that [are] closest to the problems have the solutions for [those] problems.” She is also sad that the struggle over who is allowed to vote continues today. “It’s been going on for so long! [Since the beginning of this country,] they were having fights about who could vote. They’re still trying to find ways to just push people out from voting.” Amari then asked a compelling question: “If they want to stop you so bad [from voting], what is the reason? It has to mean something.”

*\*The name used here is a pseudonym. We chose Amari because it means “strength, builder,” which we felt was incredibly apt for her.*

Florida's lack of a coordinated system allowing people to look up what they owe in terms of restitution, fines or fees creates frustration, confusion, and misinformation. Without this infrastructure, individuals may be unable to answer a fundamental question with certainty: Are all of my legal financial obligations paid and therefore my voting rights restored? Amendment 4 has also generated confusion about voter-eligibility status due to carve outs. Amendment 4 excludes people convicted of murder or a felony-level sex offense from voter restoration. Carveouts are inherently complex to implement at the state-level resulting in confusion that not only affects Floridians seeking to re-register and vote but also among state actors who are responsible for administering the law. Because of conflicting sources of information, women and others may face criminal liability, potentially including lengthy terms of incarceration, for an honest mistake about their voter eligibility.<sup>48</sup> Women voters can, and have, become targets of prosecution even when the misinformation about their voting rights comes from correctional officials such as probation or parole officers, election offices or staff, official government mailings, or other state actors.<sup>49</sup>

## Virginia

Virginia's Constitution permanently bans people with felony-level convictions from voting. Beginning in 2000, lawmakers and multiple governors eased the burdens of voting rights restoration for Virginians with a felony-level conviction.<sup>50</sup> Then in 2023, Governor Glenn Youngkin rescinded his predecessors' policy of automatically restoring voting rights post-incarceration. This reverted rights restoration in Virginia to a case-by-case basis, making it highly discretionary, more onerous, and less transparent.

In 2026, there is new momentum in Virginia to restore voting rights for people with felony-level convictions. In *King v. Youngkin* (2026), a federal judge ruled that only felonies that were common law in 1870 could deprive

Virginians of their right to vote.<sup>51</sup> The Commonwealth also identified three statutory offenses that disqualify Virginians from registering to vote or voting, because they match the elements of one of the common law offenses: murder, voluntary manslaughter, and involuntary manslaughter.<sup>52</sup> Then on July 31, 2026, with a new leadership in place, Governor Abigail Spanberger restored the voting rights of over 66,000 people with past felony convictions who had completed their term of incarceration.<sup>53</sup>

In November 2026, Virginians will vote in a statewide referendum on a constitutional amendment that would restore voting rights for Virginians who are no longer incarcerated in prison.<sup>54</sup> As of 2024, there were almost 58,000 women in Virginia living in the community who were stripped of their voting rights because of a felony-level conviction.<sup>55</sup> Without the passage of this Amendment or some other change in policy or law, these women will never be able to vote unless their civil rights are restored by the governor.

## CANDACE\*

### Disenfranchised in Virginia

**“Nothing says normal about somebody not having their voting rights...  
When [justice-impacted women] get out here in the community  
[after prison], we’re still stripped of dignity.”**

#### Important voting rights issues:

Local and city council issues

Reproductive rights

Incarcerated women’s needs

Support for justice-impacted mothers

Reentry resources for justice-impacted people

**No voice in 19 federal elections and counting.** Released in 2024 after serving 18 years in prison, Candace has not been able to vote in almost two decades. Despite maintaining employment and running two businesses, Candace has had no say in electing her representatives. Even while living in the community, she remains disenfranchised as she is completing five years of felony probation. Candace, now 40 years old, expressed frustration: “Now that I actually do want to read up on politics, learn about certain things, I still can’t vote. I can get the knowledge, but as of right now, I still cannot get my rights back.”

**The influence of environment.** When Candace was growing up, her mother was “in and out of incarceration.” She lived primarily with her grandparents, who “did a great job, [but] I just chose not to listen.” Candace “was pulled toward a narrative of fast money, just feeling like I had to be with the latest.” She explained, “I didn’t have those things. I just tried to get it any way that I could.” Reflecting on her past, she said, “From my childhood all the way until I was 22 before I got incarcerated, I was just living. I was too busy trying to fit in.”

**The healing power of sisterhood and learning from incarcerated women about voting.** It was during Candace’s incarceration that “so many great women helped me take the broken pieces of my trauma and childhood and piece together what [I] would look like coming out.” These women became her chosen family and a critical support system when Candace lost her grandparents. As she says, “They poured into me and supported me mentally, physically, and emotionally.” Incarcerated women also played a pivotal role in Candace’s desire to vote. Candace said she “never took voting seriously until my incarceration and then [also] when I got out.” Women serving long sentences sat down with Candace to talk about things they wish they could do, like vote. She said, “A lot of them [said] to vote, because we’re sick of seeing this, this, and this.” Candace shared that they “explained the voting process and how it worked and how it’s not just about voting for the president. It’s your local votes that matter most.”

**The importance of the right to vote when returning to the community.** Because Candace cannot vote, she feels as though she is missing out on being able to decide “who is sitting in office to make these decisions when it comes to...individuals [who] have been justice-involved.” She knows she “still face[s] some obstacles as far as being a felon, especially [as] a Black woman,” and that “there [have] definitely been some doors slammed in my face.”\*\* Too many doors remain closed to returning citizens. Candace noted that despite becoming a certified peer recovery specialist during her incarceration, she cannot register through behavioral health now that she has returned home. “We’re good enough to be utilized in the Virginia Department of Corrections to teach these classes and work in the mental health department, but when we come home you’re saying we’re not good enough.” For her, these are policy issues closely tied to reentry success, including the right to vote for such issues. Candace offered insight on the contradictory nature of her situation: “If you talk about rehabilitation and if you talk about reentry, and then you talk about ‘Oh, well, you can’t get your [voting] rights back’... It’s just a smack in the face all over again.”

**The cost of felony disenfranchisement for women.** Candace acknowledged that in the past she was not knowledgeable about voting and politics. She reported, “Now that I’m knowledgeable and know that myself and so many others have a say in who we allow to sit in those [elected] seats, that puts a fire under my tail.” Candace believes she should have had her voting rights back as soon as she walked out of those prison gates: “It shouldn’t be ‘Wait until you get off of [felony] probation.’” As for the more than 760,000 women who cannot vote due to these laws and policies, Candace feels that “the whole election” is at stake. For justice-impacted women who cannot vote, she shared, “It’s affecting us right now. We have to fight for our right to vote when it comes to our bodies. A lot of lawmakers are trying to make changes when it comes to women’s reproductive rights...all the way down to the battle to getting out [of prison] and getting our kids back.” According to Candace, history is starting to repeat itself: “At one point [in] time our ancestors and the individual women that came before us had to fight so much to get [the right to vote]. Now we’re still finding ourselves in this generation right back in the same seat to have this conversation.”

**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** For Virginia, Candace believes the 2026 ballot initiative to amend Virginia’s constitution and provide automatic restoration of voting rights upon release from incarceration would be a “big step in the right direction,” adding “kudos to the people who fought for this.” As for the country, she wants everyone to “see each other as human beings [and] show empathy to every situation,” noting that “We gotta realize that we are not the enemies towards each other.” Further, Candace stated that “[justice-impacted women] will not be stopped by the stripping of [their] votes. It’s just putting a battery in [their] back to make [them] fight harder.” She wants policymakers to “be a part of the solution and not the problem” and to allow formerly incarcerated people to return to the community as full citizens who can cast their ballot. And on her right to vote: “Once I have my rights back, I feel like I’ll be a force to be reckoned with.”

\*Candace’s last name has been omitted from her profile at her request.

\*\* While The Sentencing Project uses person-first language (e.g., person with a felony conviction), we have not adjusted the language used by individuals in their direct quotes.

## Kentucky

Kentucky's history of voting rights restoration efforts has been marked by dramatic and unpredictable changes. Kentucky is similar to Virginia in that bans people with felony convictions from voting for life unless they secure clemency from the governor. The restoration process changed multiple times when voting-eligible Kentuckians elected new governors – in 2004, 2008, and 2015 – either making the restoration process harder (e.g., payment of a filing fee, requiring reference letters and a personal statement) or simplifying it; including expanding or contracting which felony-level convictions would qualify for automatic restoration after sentence completion.<sup>56</sup>

In 2019, via an executive order, Governor Andy Beshear re-enfranchised a subset of people who had completed their sentences, if their underlying felony conviction was classified as nonviolent. This most recent 2019 executive order created a pathway for some Kentuckians to regain their voting rights. It is a precarious re-enfranchisement mechanism, however, because it was not established through legislative action and constitutional change. This leaves Kentuckians' voting rights subject to shifting political whims. In Kentucky, over 28,000 women were disenfranchised post-sentence in 2024.<sup>57</sup> Almost 17,000 women were completing felony probation or parole.<sup>58</sup> If the 2019 executive order were to be rescinded by the next governor, the subset of women with nonviolent felony convictions would no longer be able to have their voting rights automatically restored.

## MEGAN COX

### Disenfranchised in Kentucky

**“If [voting] wasn’t something that mattered, why would [the government] take it away from us?”**

#### Important voting rights issues:

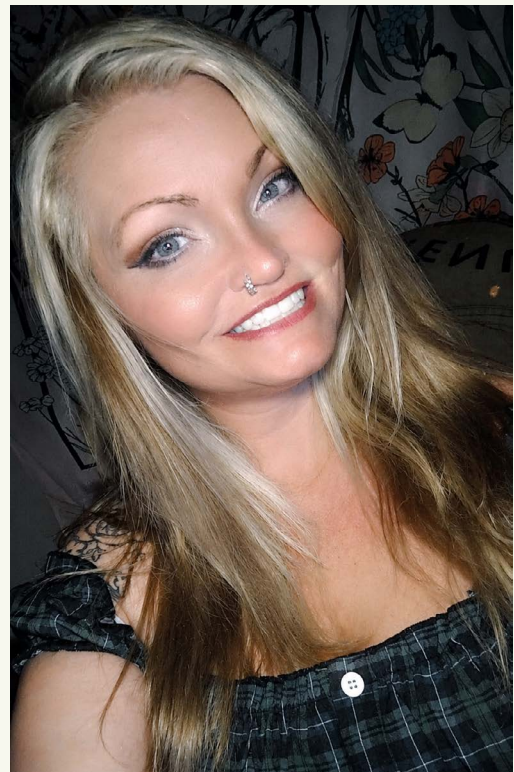
Women’s rights

Addressing domestic violence

Housing and homelessness

Medicaid policies

Addiction recovery and access to treatment



**Early roots in civic engagement.** Megan grew up with “parents [who] have always been the type that went out and voted.” Her dad was especially excited to vote, and “it was always an event growing up in my house.” Megan’s own civic engagement started in her early 20s. For the 2008 presidential election, she canvassed her apartment complex, encouraging people to register to vote. But her involvement with the criminal legal system nearly derailed her passion for civic engagement – as far as her own voting and helping other people access their right to vote. “My experience with the criminal [legal] system absolutely just made me have even more disdain [for voting and politics].” It was her work with ABLE (Advocacy Based on Lived Experience), a nonprofit organization based in Kentucky, that reconnected Megan to her roots in voting rights work. “I didn’t realize until I started working with ABLE how many people [in Kentucky] weren’t voting, and if we could bring people together, how much of a change we could actually make.”

**Substance use disorder, the criminal legal system, and recovery.** At around age 14, Megan began recreationally using alcohol and drugs while her immediate family members were battling their own substance use disorders. Then, at age 16, Megan was convicted of her first felony. She “took charges for [drugs]...to keep [her boyfriend from] getting more time.” Her dependency on substances continued to intensify until “addiction took over a majority of [her] life,” and she eventually “sold drugs to support [her] habits.” In 2022, at age 37, everything “spiraled completely” when Megan started using fentanyl. In 2023, she was arrested and charged with intent to sell a controlled drug, and was in jeopardy of permanently losing custody of her children. The thought of losing her kids and the family court’s recommendation to start rehab immediately spurred Megan into action. She entered rehab. Her sobriety helped her find her purpose, which included earning her peer support certification and working on her bachelor’s degree. Entering recovery work became one of the most influential experiences of her life. Reflecting on the impact of this work, Megan shared, “Seeing people come back to life, because I know what it felt like for me... It’s like watching miracles every day.” After pleading guilty to charges that carried a 6-year prison sentence, the court suspended Megan’s prison term in recognition of her success in

recovery and efforts to rebuild her life. Megan, now 41, is currently completing a 5-year sentence of felony probation. However, due to her felony-level conviction, while she is on felony probation she cannot vote.

**Will I be able to vote again?** Megan's last opportunity to vote was the 2024 presidential election. She said, "I knew I was about to lose that right. I wanted to use it before I lost it." The only reason she knew her voting rights were about to be terminated was because her father informed her. "Nobody in the legal system mentioned it. [My dad] was the one who told me that I needed to check it." When Megan confirmed she would lose her right to vote during her felony probation period, she said, "I felt like it was extra punishment. Here you've got this sentence, but here's some more punishment to go with it." For her, it feels as though she has been sidelined from having a voice in today's political climate. "I'm just a bystander. I have to wait four more years before I can have a voice, which is crazy." She is also concerned and apprehensive about the long-term stability of her voting rights because of the uncertainty surrounding Kentucky's constitution. "If we get another governor and [they] decide [they] don't like what Governor Andy Beshear did [an executive order in 2019 to restore voting rights to those who have completed sentences for nonviolent offenses]...I don't know what will happen. Hopefully I get them back in 2030."

**Growing up in the South and women's disenfranchisement.** "Something about Eastern Kentucky really loves to strip women down." Megan discussed how many women in the South have been raised to be "wives, moms, [or] someone's girlfriend." She said, "It was never to have our own identity and to stand on our own." For her, the advice for girls growing up was to find a rich husband – not to go to college and succeed. Megan also connected these traditional gender roles to the treatment she experienced at the hands of law enforcement. When Megan tried to report a domestic violence incident, she "was told to shut up and sit down." Despite reaching out for help, "[The officer] would not take [my then-boyfriend] off my property." At the time, she was also pregnant. "When you are a woman, [law enforcement] does not care. They do not care what happens to you." Her continued experiences with the criminal legal system made her feel like it was a "good ol' boys system...just a rinse, wash, repeat cycle." She explained, "We had the same jailers for years. We had the same people that kept getting voted in for years." As for the more than 760,000 women who cannot vote due to these laws and policies, Megan said, "I think [felony disenfranchisement policies are] built like that for a reason. [The government] wants to strip women's voices. They've done this since the beginning of time. In [abortion] debates, in domestic violence and assault. It just strips us from having a say in anything. I really believe the government loves that."

**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** For Megan, voting builds a sense of community. She wants it to "stop being about red and blue, Democrat or Republican, and [to] start being about the people." Megan believes that those with the most money, including corporations, have the most power in politics. She feels that "We [the everyday people] don't matter." She thinks every state should let justice-impacted people vote, even when they are completing their sentences. "Not losing your rights at all makes sense to me, because, if you're incarcerated, you're already disconnected from your community. You already feel different. Why do you not have a right to say anything about what happens in your community?" Megan also wants lawmakers and elected officials to know that justice-impacted women matter. "Regardless of anything we went through, we matter. Our voice matters. What we have to say means something." As Megan holds on to hope, she continues her work with ABLE – registering people to vote, talking to them about their rights, and "really [letting] people know that they matter."

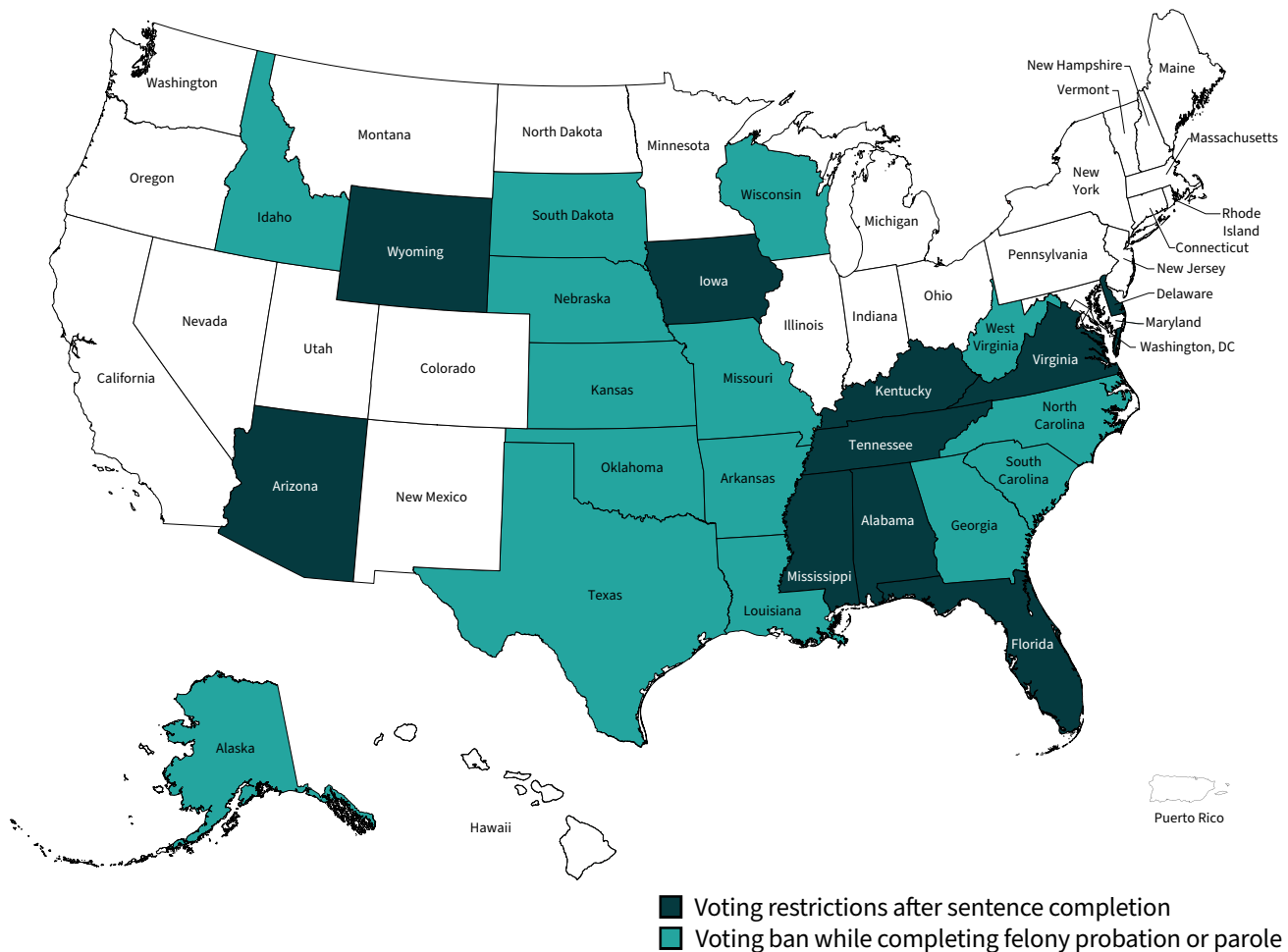
## Blocked from Voting During Community Supervision: An Experience in Texas

In 2024, almost 253,000 American women were stripped of their right to vote while completing terms of felony probation or parole.<sup>59</sup> Fifteen of the 25 states with these restrictions will restore women's voting rights after the successful completion of their terms of community supervision.

In Texas, more than 68,000 women were banned from voting due to completing felony probation or parole.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983, Texas repealed its lifetime voting ban for people convicted of felonies. In 1985, the waiting period to apply for voting rights restoration was reduced to two years and then finally removed in 1997.<sup>61</sup> Almost three decades later, Texas' progress has stalled, leaving the Lone Star State behind other jurisdictions who have expanded their electorate to include people on community supervision in their voting rights reforms.

### States with Felony Voting Restrictions or Bans during Felony Probation and Parole or After Sentence Completion, 2024



Source: Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

## LOVINAH IGBANI

### Re-enfranchised in Texas

**“I tell people, ‘Vote like your life depends on it,’ because it does.”**

#### Important voting rights issues:

Women’s rights

Reproductive rights

Mental health

Harm reduction programs

Jobs, wages, and housing

Marriage equality

Immigration rights



**Voting rights stripped – twice.** For a total of 10 years, Lovinah could not vote. As a result of separate drug-related felony-level convictions, Lovinah lost her voting rights on two different occasions. After completing a two-year prison term, during which her voting rights were suspended, she regained her voting rights immediately upon release. She was then incarcerated a second time losing her right to vote for four years followed by an additional four years on parole, delaying her re-enfranchisement. When asked what she felt she lost out on when her voting rights were taken away, Lovinah replied, “It silenced me. It silenced me for a while. I missed out on the opportunity to cast my vote – to decide on where some of my tax dollars are being spent.” The Texas Constitution bans people convicted of a felony from voting until they complete their full sentence, including time on parole when citizens are living in their communities.

**The formative years.** Lovinah was a child who grew up in the midst of the crack-cocaine epidemic. Her mother “caught up and fell victim” to it for years and eventually lost custody of Lovinah due to her substance use disorder. This major upheaval meant that Lovinah had to move across the country – from Detroit to Texas – to live with her father. Texas would not become her safe place. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Lovinah was subjected to abuse and interpersonal violence. Then, in her 20s, she fought her own battle with substance use disorder. In hindsight, as she learned more about the role and influence of her early life experiences, Lovinah said, “I was exposed to a tremendous amount of what I now know is childhood trauma. So, I definitely became a product of, and someone dealing with, adverse childhood experiences. Statistically, I was more susceptible [to system involvement].”

**Coming home.** Since her release from prison in 2014, Lovinah graduated with her master's degree, and she recalls that "walking across that stage was monumental." She volunteered for five years at the Texas Department of Corrections as the reentry coordinator and led the prison ministry. She bought her first home. She has advocated for others, explaining, "That's part of my purpose here, and life in general...to be a voice for the voiceless. Not everyone will be in a position to fight, or will have the voice or courage." One of the pivotal moments in Lovinah's life was giving testimony to support a climate control bill<sup>62</sup> in front of the Texas Legislature, detailing the abhorrent conditions of living in prisons without air conditioning – because she had witnessed people die of heat-related suffering. Reflecting on her journey after release, Lovinah said, "I'm a social worker [at] heart. I had the unfortunate experience of experiencing an unusual amount of trauma, but it's given me a viewpoint that I'm able to use to my advantage and for the advantage of others."

**From "I was a non-voter" to "I'm a voter."** Lovinah's firsthand experiences of imprisonment is what sparked her interest in voting. Prior to her incarceration, Lovinah spent most of her life believing that her vote did not matter. "I believe the media and the government has done an excellent job at convincing minorities specifically that your vote doesn't matter." Since being home and off parole, Lovinah views every election – from local to presidential – as an event in which she is honored to be able to vote. When reflecting on voting in her first presidential election, Lovinah said, "It was the first time in my entire life that I ever had an emotional reaction to the presidential election... I'm seeing so much racial division and things like that... It was huge for me to be able to be part of that process. Yes, I'm complaining about certain issues, but I'm also making sure my vote, my voice is heard by making the time to go and cast my vote." She encourages her friends and, in her words, "anyone who knows me," to register to vote, and then go out and vote. "I believe there's power in numbers, so my views have really shifted over the years, over the course of my life, when it comes to voting and the importance of being able to vote."

**Reflections on felony disenfranchisement.** To Lovinah, who is now 49 years old, having her voting rights stripped from her never made sense. Following her imprisonment, how could she be banned from voting but still expected to pay taxes? "When I got out, the IRS and the government did not say, 'You know what? You're on parole for the next four years. Because you're on parole, we don't want your taxes. When you get off parole, then you'll be able to pay taxes again.' So my money is good enough for you to take, but I can't vote on how it's spent?" Lovinah stressed her belief that voting is a human right – especially when the punishment for lawbreaking has already been satisfied. "You broke the law. You're sentenced to whatever you're sentenced to. Can my punishment not end there?" As for the more than 760,000 women who cannot vote due to these laws and policies, Lovinah feels women's rights are at stake, including "our rights to love who we want to, reproductive rights, so many rights, and even possibly our right to vote all over again. A lot is at stake. So much." She wants policymakers to understand that women matter and their votes matter. "We want to participate... Allow us to move forward. Allow us not to stay stuck in our past by stripping us of our right to vote."

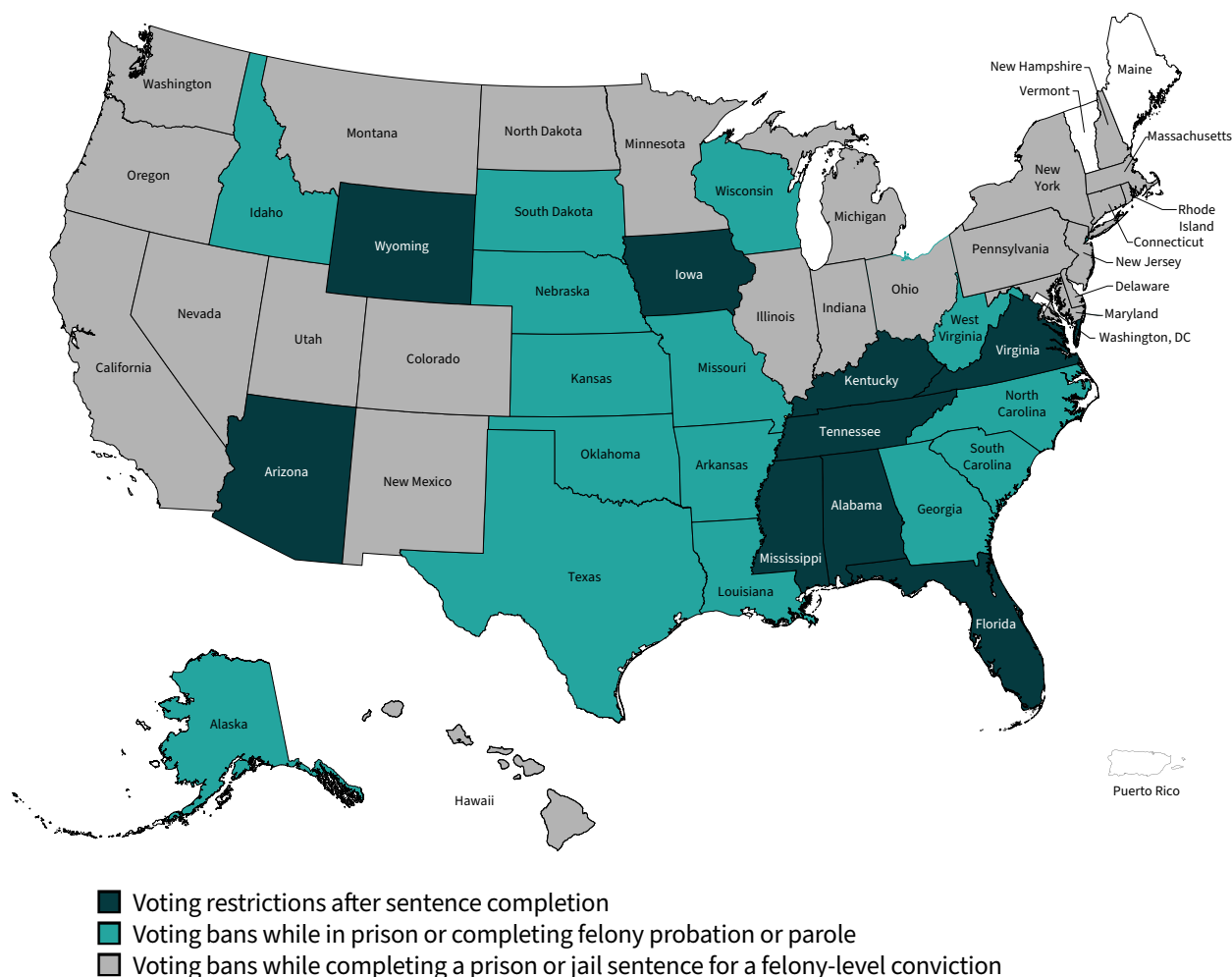
**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** As Lovinah reflected on her understanding of the United States and her place in it, she said, "To me, this country was shaped on segregation and violence and racism... So many people before me really paved a way, and attempted to pave a way, for me to have a better life... It cost many people their life, their freedom, just for me to have the right to vote, the right to work, the right to own a home." Her hope is that "this country can change to where it's truly a democracy, and there's equality for all." She also added, based on her personal and professional experiences, that "prisons and jails are not the response to change behavior. There [should be] more focus on mental health and less focus on incarceration. I just want equality for all."

## Blocked from Voting During Imprisonment: An Experience in California

As of 2024, almost 79,000 women were barred from voting in states that deny voting rights to people completing felony-level sentences in a prison or jail.<sup>63</sup> In 23 states, upon completion of their prison or jail sentence, women will have their voting rights restored.<sup>64</sup> With the exception of women completing prison sentences in Maine, Vermont, and Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC, all other U.S. jurisdictions bar imprisoned women from voting.

Women who are serving life sentences will be stripped of their voting rights permanently during their imprisonment unless state laws change or they receive relief from their extreme sentence. According to the Sentencing Project's most recent national census of people serving life sentences, one in every 11 women in prison – a total of 6,800 women – is serving a life sentence.<sup>65</sup> Only 15 of these imprisoned women – residents of Maine and Vermont – retain their right to vote while completing their life sentence.<sup>66</sup>

### States with Felony Voting Restrictions or Bans during Prison or Felony Probation and Parole or After Sentence Completion, 2024



Source: Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

## ELIZABETH (LIZ) LOZANO

### Re-enfranchised in California

**“In many ways it felt like we were already gagged by being incarcerated. When voting time came, even more so. It was painful to know your hands are tied, and there’s nothing you can do.”**

#### Important voting rights issues:

Juvenile justice

Racial justice

Victim’s rights

Immigration law and policy

Ending the death penalty and life sentences



**Adolescence, a life sentence, and its repercussions.** At just 19 years old, Liz was sentenced to juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) for a crime that happened when she was 16. At that time, it meant she would die in prison. Prior to her incarceration, Liz had voted once. She did not realize that she would lose her voting rights upon imprisonment, because “nobody told me.” She later learned through her involvement with various organizations that she was ineligible to vote. She said, “I learned through the frustration of wanting to be a part of something and being told, ‘You’re not going to be able to vote. Your rights were taken away,’... Wait, what?” Over time, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a series of decisions restricting the application of life sentences to youth. These changes allowed Liz to seek relief in 2015 and again in 2016. Despite her growth and maturation, which was in part evidenced by her organizing and advocacy work within the prison, her original sentencing judge reimposed JLWOP twice. Almost a decade later, the court finally considered Liz’s youth at the time of the offense, along with her transformation and accomplishments over nearly 30 years of incarceration. The court amended Liz’s conviction offense, resentencing her to 13 years, with credit for time served, no parole, and immediate release. In March 2025, Liz came home, her voting rights restored because, as of 2020, California limits disenfranchisement to those completing sentences in prison. But about the 30 years during which she was not permitted to vote, she says that “It was so painful to know that our voices couldn’t be heard, and we couldn’t vote. That really impacted me.”

**A childhood shaped by family violence.** Liz is the first-born and only daughter in a family of six children whose parents immigrated from Mexico. Liz said her mom did the best she could raising her and her brothers, but “She was very hard, very disciplined with us.” Liz elaborated: “As a kid, when certain things happened, you think ‘I’m not loved because of that.’ What was going on in our home [was] domestic violence, and I didn’t know how to navigate that.” To escape, Liz ran away from home for the first time at age 13 and stayed with other family. Later, she experienced culture shock when she transferred from a private to a public school as she was “picked on and

bullied, because [she] was different from other kids and didn't know a whole lot." Liz admits that up to this point, she was very sheltered and was told at home to "sit down and [be] quiet [because] women are in the back." At age 16, she "ran away for the last time...and within three months joined a gang." The gang was later involved in a robbery-homicide, resulting in the death of another youth. Now, at the age of 51, Liz says, "[I] know that there's nothing that I can do that will ever, ever make what I did right, but I know that I can walk my walk showing what accountability and transformation is, living a life of service."

**Finding voice, fighting for change, and planting seeds of hope.** Liz shared how her mother instilled in her the willingness "to rise up and fight for what you believe in; you are the voice for the ones that cannot have that voice." Liz said that while she was in prison, "that came out of me" and that is "exactly what I started doing." She established the first ever Juvenile Offenders Committee, with support from the Capitol in Sacramento, California, to "help other youth get on track...to acknowledge their accountability and responsibility in the harm they've caused, but also understand what happened. It was like restorative justice in prison." She also started "Healing Circles," inviting district attorneys and legislators to engage with people who were sentenced to life or to death, people who had been exonerated after wrongful convictions, and former lifers who were thriving in their communities. Liz said, "We wanted them to see us as humans. It felt like along the way, [legal actors] had lost that humanity towards us." These powerful interactions reminded those in power that "Hurt people hurt people, and healed people heal people." She wanted these court actors and lawmakers to work at planting seeds of hope for personal transformation rather than shaming or labeling people for their past harmful behavior.

**Suppressing justice-impacted women's voting rights.** Liz's incarceration was a powerful experience that brought voting rights to the forefront for her. Because she and her incarcerated "sisters" were prohibited from voting, Liz said, "We organized. What could we do but to organize?" They wrote letters to senators and assembly members, organized mass mailing campaigns, and created prompts for their networks and family members to use when writing their own letters. For the more than 760,000 justice-impacted women who are prevented from voting by such laws and policies, Liz highlighted the connection between voting rights and community safety: "We talk about recidivism, and it's important to be involved in civic engagement. When you're stripping [justice-impacted women] of [their vote], it's like they're not a worthy person. You're shaming them.... [The government] is accountable to fewer and fewer citizens." Liz pointed to the ongoing struggle women face to protect hard-won gains in their rights, including the right to vote: "I feel like women take steps forward, or we have wins, but it's constantly...we have one win and [then] it's like three steps back."

**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** Liz holds a bleak view of the state of American democracy. "I can't even say there's a hope. The situation right now is so sad." She reflected on the harm caused by the separation of immigrant families, attacks on constitutional rights, and the nation at war. Her hope is that "the right person steps in [who] is not going to harm, really going to listen, and maybe have to make some hard decisions, but listen to the people and not just try to change the Constitution to manipulate it to work for them." As for all of the justice-impacted women who cannot vote, she wants to remind policymakers that "These women are primary caregivers, right? When they cannot vote on their children's and community's interests...they lose an advocate. It's harming the collective well-being. You are choosing to exclude people for your own agenda." Liz feels "There is always a way [our government] tries to hush [women] or put us in the back." She strongly advocates for justice-impacted women's "rights [which] should be given back. They should be allowed to be part of the community." Liz asserts that "Every human, regardless of conviction, if they want to vote [they] should have that right. A vote without barriers."

## Limited Ballot Access During Incarceration: An Experience in Maine

A subset of women retain their voting rights during incarceration. This includes:

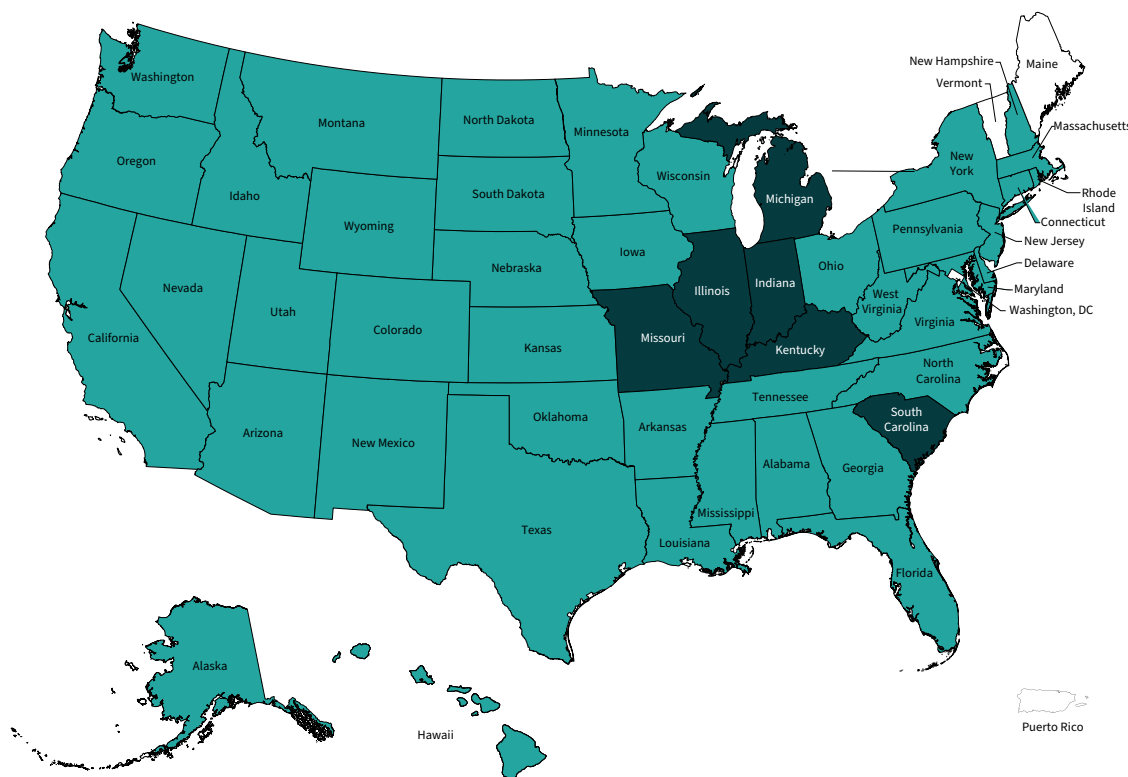
- Women in most U.S. jails who are completing a sentence for a misdemeanor-level offense or who are pre-trial (not convicted)<sup>67</sup>
- Residents of Maine, Vermont, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico who are completing a prison or jail sentence for a felony-level conviction

In 2024, about 95,000 women were incarcerated in **jails** nationwide.<sup>68</sup> Because well over half of the entire jail population (men and women) at that time was not yet convicted, a substantial number of these women were eligible to vote in jail.<sup>69</sup> In addition, over 660 women completing a **prison** sentence in Maine, Vermont, Wash-

ington, DC, Puerto Rico, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons retained their voting rights.<sup>70</sup>

While these incarcerated women are, by law, able to vote during elections, having that right does not always guarantee meaningful access to the ballot, a result of de facto disenfranchisement.<sup>71</sup> The Sentencing Project identified multiple and substantial barriers to voting during incarceration in Maine and Vermont.<sup>72</sup> Barriers included uncertainty about voting eligibility, limited information about how to request and submit a mail-in ballot from their correctional facility, and inadequate access to information about candidates and elections, among others.<sup>73</sup> Yet, as illustrated here, in Maine – a state that has never disenfranchised any of its residents – the power of voting builds connection to community during incarceration, transforms identities, and promotes positive reintegration when people return home.<sup>74</sup>

### Voting Rights in Select U.S. Prisons and Jails Nationwide



- Cannot vote in jail while completing a misdemeanor sentence. Can vote when pre-trial/not convicted.
- Can vote in jail when pre-trial/not convicted and while completing a misdemeanor sentence
- Can vote during incarceration in a prison or jail (no restrictions)

Source: Ahluwalia, B., & Hodder, C. (2026). *Felon voting laws by state: A rights restoration guide*. FindLaw; Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). *Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction*. The Sentencing Project.

## NICOLE LEMAY

### Never disenfranchised in Maine

**“[Voting during my incarceration] made me feel like I was still a citizen of the United States, a citizen of Maine. It renewed a little bit of hope that my voice matters. I’m not just an incarcerated person. I’m not only this, but I’m also a citizen.”**

#### Important voting rights issues:

Human rights

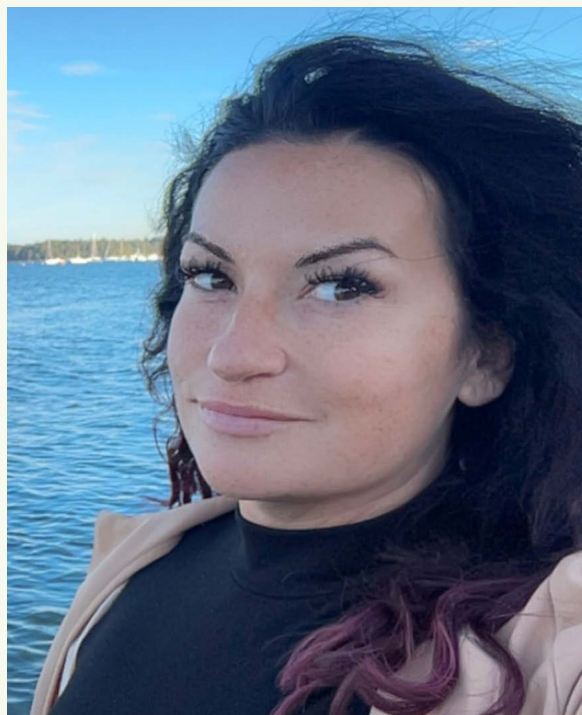
Reproductive rights

Youth diversion

Second look legislation

Clean slate legislation

Restoring parole in Maine



**A major car accident, opioids, and prison.** In 2014, Nicole’s car was hit by a dump truck. She went to the doctor, and “pretty much the first thing that she gave me was an opioid.” It worked for pain management for a while, until it “progressed into a pretty strong dependence.” Her substance use disorder spanned “a good six, seven years” and buying and selling pills became part of that cycle. Nicole was sentenced to a 10-year prison term (six years suspended) and three years of probation for selling prescribed drugs. Looking back, Nicole admitted that it took prison to find recovery. “I don’t wish prison upon people, but I was never able to [find recovery]. Would I have [found recovery] before getting sick or dying? I was very sick, and I didn’t realize it. I still had to go serve that prison time.” Before transitioning to a period of supervised community confinement and then probation, Nicole was incarcerated for two years at a women’s minimum security, pre-release facility.

**Planting seeds for hope and transformation in prison.** Nicole, now 38, said, “I think what really changed my life was education in prison.” Nicole earned her college degree while she was incarcerated and walked with her graduating class. “Most of the people I was in classes with, and the teachers, knew I was incarcerated... They wrapped me up in some love. I got a few awards...[It made me feel] validated, like my hard work was worth something.” She worked at a horse rescue across the street from the prison and befriended an employee. After a year of working together, courageously, Nicole revealed her incarceration status. Nicole said that her friend “not changing her thoughts about me was life-changing. It reminded me that I’m a person... That’s when I knew that I was still lovable, right?” Her desire to vote and to be involved in politics also grew during her incarceration: “If you would have told me 10 years ago I’d be having [political] watch parties, I would’ve been like, ‘Yeah, okay,’ [but] once you realize that, change can happen with a collection of people.”

**The power of voting from prison.** Prior to her incarceration, Nicole “didn’t know that people could vote while incarcerated in Maine.” When asked what she thought was driving those misperceptions, Nicole brought up negative narratives, such as “that people [who] are incarcerated shouldn’t have any rights. Narratives that our voices don’t matter anymore. You’re locked away and you’re not part of the society. That’s probably a narrative I told myself too until other people showed me different, right?” When Nicole found out that she could still vote during her incarceration at a registration event, she said, “Sign me up!” For her, knowing she could vote made her feel “a little bit of a boost, like second chances might be real. It reminded me that I used to have a civic duty and the choices we make collectively will affect us. I might be incarcerated now, but there will be a day where I’m outside. These things do matter.” She voted on the inside and, after her release, she continues to vote at every opportunity.

**Perspectives on voting and the absurdity of felony disenfranchisement.** To Nicole, voting is a fundamental right that affirms a person's humanity, especially in places like jails and prisons, where people are often stripped of that humanity. Nicole also feels that “[Felony disenfranchisement] really is putting [people convicted of felonies] in an old caste system.” This is particularly bewildering to her given that “Our president [has] very much been convicted of felonies” yet can still vote and hold office. As for the more than 760,000 women who cannot vote due to these laws and policies, Nicole stressed that when women do not have their right to vote, “It affects us. It affects our children. It affects us as women, our day-to-day life.” She is deeply concerned that women’s roles in the United States will become akin to those in the television shows *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, where women are property and trained to be obedient wives in an oppressive totalitarian culture. “I feel like that’s where we’re going in society if nothing changes. I know that sounds crazy, but it’s realistic.” Nicole wants politicians and lawmakers to know “There is a story behind every woman’s conviction. There is probably a lifetime of reasons that led up to [her] becoming incarcerated. You can’t take that much power from somebody that’s already paid their dues. It’s not ethical. It’s not humane. We’re still citizens of this country.”

**Hopes for the future of American democracy.** As Nicole reflected on what shapes her understanding of this country and her place in it, she observed that in the past, “I never really got into anything political, because I felt pretty safe... What really has affected me deeply, shaped me, is seeing [the rollback] of women's reproductive rights. It really hit me to the core. It showed me how far back we’re going.” These rapid changes in law called her to action, and also influenced her work as executive director of Youth-LED Justice, an organization that supports justice-impacted youth. She teaches young people about civic engagement. She tells them, “This is important, because it matters for your future. Where are we going to be in four years when you’re old enough to vote?” When she thinks of politics beyond Maine, she wonders, “How many voices [of people involved in the criminal legal system] that really have some great knowledge and things to contribute are restricted?” Ultimately, Nicole’s bottom line is this: “If you live in America, and these laws apply to you, or these political things apply to you, you should have the right to vote regardless... Even if you’re doing life in prison, the policies will affect the people you love, it will affect your outside surroundings, if you have any [outside surroundings], and also directly affect your own life. Everyone should have their own autonomy and options to contribute to the political scene.”

# PROTECTING THE VOTING RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS

**“With no sacredness of the ballot there can be no sacredness of human life itself.”<sup>75</sup>**

**— Ida B. Wells-Barnett, 1910**

As the United States marks its 250th year, the country risks becoming an even more “flawed democracy.”<sup>76</sup> Now more than ever, participating in U.S. elections is critical to reverse this course. We must protect the right to vote for all women, who are the nation’s largest voting bloc – including women who have come into contact with the criminal legal system and those who are currently incarcerated. Ensuring that every woman can vote affirms her political agency, strengthens community ties, and moves the United States toward a more inclusive democracy that generations of women have fought to achieve. To that end, The Sentencing Project advocates for the following reforms:

- Abolish all laws or policies that ban women and people with felony-level convictions from voting in elections.
- Abolish all laws or policies in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, and South Carolina which ban women and people from voting who are completing a misdemeanor-level sentence.
- Eliminate state-level barriers that prevent women and people with felony-level convictions from regaining their right to vote, including requirements to pay legal financial obligations before restoration, which effectively means the imposition of a poverty penalty.
- Implement in-person voting in all prisons and jails. This measure would protect women’s access to the ballot during incarceration. Establishing in-person voting would not only expand access for all incarcerated people, but would expand access for correctional staff as well.

- Provide women clear, accessible information and outreach about voter eligibility during incarceration and while they complete sentences in the community. Once a voter is eligible, use research-informed strategies, such as informational mailers inviting people to participate and personalized outreach efforts from people they respect or love, to engage people impacted by the criminal legal system in voter registration and voting.<sup>77</sup>
- Create law and correctional system policies and practices that integrate voter registration into the reentry process, following the lead of jurisdictions like Maryland and Michigan. Michigan automatically registers people to vote as they leave the prison, and Maryland passed legislation in 2026 that will require the automatic restoration of voter registration for individuals returning home from state correctional facilities.<sup>78</sup>

The suffrage movement waged its battle for nearly a century before the U.S. Constitution formally included women’s right to vote, yet the struggle for full and equal access to the ballot persists today. Women continue to carry forward this legacy of activism, including the six women we profiled in this policy brief, through organizing, protests, and efforts to dismantle barriers to meaningful political participation. No democracy can truly represent its people unless every citizen has an equal opportunity to cast a ballot.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>2</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>3</sup> The Sentencing Project sought to achieve geographic diversity in the selection of profiled individuals, and to include women from different backgrounds. Women were recruited through our advocacy networks. Interviews were conducted in April 2026.
- <sup>4</sup> An estimated 3.2 million men are locked out of voting due to a felony-level conviction; Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>5</sup> Council on Criminal Justice. (2025). [\*Women's justice: By the numbers\*](#); Napal, D., Budd, K. M., & Rovner, J. (2025). [\*Incarcerated women and girls\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>6</sup> Hester, T. (1987). [\*Correctional populations in the United States, 1985\*](#). Bureau of Justice Statistics; Napal, D., Budd, K. M., & Rovner, J. (2025). [\*Incarcerated women and girls\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>7</sup> Latina imprisonment rates are likely undercounts due to data quality issues (e.g., missing data); Napal, D., Budd, K. M., & Rovner, J. (2025). [\*Incarcerated women and girls\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Sabol, W. J., Wallace, A., & Johnson, T. L. (2024). [\*Racial and ethnic disparities in female imprisonment in the U.S.\*](#) Council on Criminal Justice.
- <sup>8</sup> Council on Criminal Justice. (2025). [\*Women's justice: By the numbers\*](#).
- <sup>9</sup> A Marshall Project survey included incarcerated people in prisons and jails. Of the 52,495 incarcerated people who answered the question on party affiliation, 35% identified as independent, 22% identified as Republican, 18% identified as Democrat, and 17% identified as “other.” The remaining 8% of respondents identified more than one affiliation (e.g., independent, other; independent, Republican; independent, Democrat; or some other combination). See Lewis, N., Heffernan, S., & Flagg, A. (2024). [\*‘Trump remains very popular here’: We surveyed 54,000 people behind bars about the election\*](#). The Marshall Project; [\*The Marshall Project\*](#). (2024). [\*The Marshall Project 2024 political survey, state summaries of selected questions\*](#). [\*The Marshall Project\*](#); Lewis, N., Eads, D., Flagg, A., & Billman, M. (2024). [\*Journalists: How to report on the political opinions of people in prisons and jails in your state\*](#). [\*The Marshall Project\*](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [\*Leser v. Garnett\*](#), 258 U.S. 130 (1922).
- <sup>11</sup> Cahill, C. D. (2020). [\*Recasting the vote: How women of color transformed the suffrage movement\*](#). The University of North Carolina Press; Dionne, E. (2020). [\*Lifting as we climb: Black women's battle for the ballot box\*](#). Penguin Random House.
- <sup>12</sup> Porter, N., Parker, A., Walk, T., Topaz, J., Turner, J., Smith, C., LaRonde-King, M., Pearce, S., & Ebenstein, J. (2024). [\*Out of step: U.S. policy on voting rights in global perspective\*](#). The Sentencing Project, Human Rights Watch, & American Civil Liberties Union.
- <sup>13</sup> The Democracy Index, a measurement of state democracy in 167 countries and territories, assessing the electoral processes, governance, civil liberties, political participation, and political culture of each, has classified the United States as a flawed democracy since 2016; Economist Intelligence Unit. (n.d.). [\*Democracy index 2025\*](#). The Economist Group.
- <sup>14</sup> This is a conservative estimate, because data on a person's sex is incomplete or not always reported by agencies that manage state and federal prisons and community corrections. This means the overall count of women without their right to vote is an undercount.
- <sup>15</sup> Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, and South Carolina are notable exceptions to the general rule regarding a misdemeanor-level conviction and voting rights. These six states disenfranchise individuals while they are completing a jail sentence for a misdemeanor conviction. See Ahluwalia, B., & Hodder, C. (2026). [\*Felon voting laws by state: A rights restoration guide\*](#). FindLaw.
- <sup>16</sup> Budd, K. M., & Didner-Jollie, R. (2025). [\*Voting from prison: Lessons from Maine and Vermont\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Porter, N. D. (2020). [\*Voting in jails\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>17</sup> See the Methodology in Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>18</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). [\*Survey of prison inmates data analysis tool \(SPI DAT\): Custom charts\*](#).
- <sup>19</sup> Lynch, S. M., DeHart, D. D., Belknap, J. E., Green, B. L., Dass-Brailsford, P., Johnson, K. A. & Whalley, E. (2014). A multisite study of the prevalence of serious mental illness, PTSD, and substance use disorders of women in jail. *Psychiatric Services*, 65(5), 670-674. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201300172>
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- <sup>21</sup> Thumma, S. D. (2020). [\*Women's suffrage in the western states and territories\*](#). *The Judges' Journal*, 59(3), 27–31; Museum of the American Revolution. (n.d.). [\*How did women lose the vote? The backlash\*](#).

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- <sup>23</sup> Brown, N. E., & Gershon, S. A. (2014). Political participation of women of color: An intersectional analysis. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 35(4), 315–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2014.955406>; Montoya, C. (2020). Intersectionality and voting rights. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 53(3), 470–473. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652000030X>
- <sup>24</sup> Cahill, C. D. (2020). *Recasting the vote: How women of color transformed the suffrage movement*. The University of North Carolina Press; Lozano, R. (2023). Vote aquí hoy: The 1975 extension of the Voting Rights Act and the creation of language minorities. *Journal of Policy History*, 35(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030622000367>
- <sup>25</sup> Cahill, C. D. (2020). *Recasting the vote: How women of color transformed the suffrage movement*. The University of North Carolina Press; Rollings, W. H. (2004). Citizenship and suffrage: The Native American struggle for civil rights in the American West, 1830–1965. *Nevada Law Journal*, 5(1), 126–140.
- <sup>26</sup> Cahill, C. D. (2020). *Recasting the vote: How women of color transformed the suffrage movement*. The University of North Carolina Press; Volpp, L. (2005). Divesting citizenship: On Asian American history and the loss of citizenship through marriage. *UCLA Law Review*, 53, 405–483.
- <sup>27</sup> See the *Magnuson Act of 1943*, Pub. L. No. 78-199, 57 Stat. 600 (1943), the *Luce-Cueller Act of 1946*, Pub. L. No. 79-483, 60 Stat. 416 (1946), & the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952*, Pub. L. No. 82-414, 66 Stat. 163 (1952); Hing, B. O. (1993). Making and remaking Asian America through immigration policy, 1850–1990. Stanford University Press.
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- <sup>29</sup> Porter, N. D., & Chung, J. (2024). Voting rights in the era of mass incarceration: A primer. The Sentencing Project.
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- <sup>34</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. (n.d.). Gender differences in voter registration and turnout. Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University–New Brunswick; United States Census Bureau. (2025). Historical reported voting rates.
- <sup>35</sup> United States Census Bureau. (2025). Voting and registration in the election of November 2024.
- <sup>36</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. (n.d.). Gender differences in voter registration and turnout. Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University–New Brunswick. According to data from the CAWP, for Asian American/Pacific Islander voters, there is no consistent gender gap in voter turnout.
- <sup>37</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. (n.d.). Gender differences in voter registration and turnout. Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University–New Brunswick.
- <sup>38</sup> See examples, such as: Bader, E. J. (2025). ‘We need equal rights in the Constitution’: NOW’s new leaders Kim Villanueva and Rose Brunache see ‘a lot of energy for advocacy.’ *Ms. Magazine*; Cineas, F. (2020). What it’s like to be formerly incarcerated and fight for the right to vote: A conversation with the two Black women at the center of one of America’s most important felony disenfranchisement cases. *VOX*; Patel-Wilson, T., & Causer, D. (2024). Keeping the voter drive alive: Nonpartisan voter registration work is a cornerstone of Black civil rights advocacy. NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.
- <sup>39</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction. The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>40</sup> Examples of states that have additional requirements post-sentence for voting rights restoration: paying or providing of evidence of a payment plan to zero out court-ordered costs and fines, fees, or restitution – Alabama, Arizona, Florida; compliance with child support orders – Tennessee; a waiting period post-sentence completion – Wyoming; requiring some type of executive action from the governor – Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia; Laroche, C. (2022). Black women and voter suppression. *Boston University Law Review*, 102, 2431–2495. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4205799>

<sup>41</sup> In total, in 2024, Florida disenfranchised 213,112 women; Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>42</sup> Florida's Amendment 4 excluded voting rights restoration for persons convicted of murder or a felony sexual offense.

<sup>43</sup> Brennan Center for Justice. (2022). [\*Voting rights restoration efforts in Florida\*](#).

<sup>44</sup> Specialized facilities include a mental health facility or residential treatment facility; Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). [\*Survey of prison inmates data analysis tool \(SPI DAT\): Custom charts\*](#).

<sup>45</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2016). [\*Survey of prison inmates data analysis tool \(SPI DAT\): Custom charts\*](#).

<sup>46</sup> Pettit, B., & Lyons, J. (2009). Incarceration and the legitimate labor market: Examining age-graded effect on employment and wages. *Law & Society Review*, 43(4), 725-756. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5893.2009.00387.x>

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<sup>48</sup> Brennan Center for Justice. (2024). [\*Voting rights restoration efforts in Florida\*](#); Lopez, A. (2022, December 21). [\*Florida's effort to charge 20 people with voter fraud has hit some roadblocks\*](#). *NPR*.

<sup>49</sup> American Civil Liberties Union. (2024). [\*Crystal Mason vs. state of Texas\*](#); Levine, S. (2024, March 29). [\*Crystal Mason: Texas woman sentenced to five years over voting error acquitted\*](#). *The Guardian*; Levine, S. (2022, April 22). [\*Prosecutor drops all charges against Pamela Moses, jailed over voting error\*](#). *The Guardian*; Levine, S. (2022, October 25). [\*Pamela Moses sues officials after voter fraud conviction overturned\*](#). *The Guardian*; Lopez, A. (2022, December 21). [\*Florida's effort to charge 20 people with voter fraud has hit some roadblocks\*](#). *NPR*.

<sup>50</sup> For an overview of Virginia and felony disenfranchisement, please see: Napal, D., & Budd, K. M. (2026). [\*Virginia should restore voting rights to over a quarter million citizens\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Porter, N. D., & McLeod, M. [\*Expanding the vote: State felony disenfranchisement reform, 1997-2023\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>51</sup> *King v. Youngkin*, No. 3:23-cv-00352, slip op. (E.D. Va. June 26, 2023)

<sup>52</sup> Virginia Department of Elections. (2026). [\*Felony convictions and voter eligibility\*](#).

<sup>53</sup> Burness, A. (2026, July 31). [\*Virginia Governor Restores Voting Rights for Thousands With Past Felony Convictions\*](#). *Bolts*; Mirshahi, D. (2026, July 31). [\*Spanberger has restored voting rights to more than 66,000 Virginians\*](#). *VPM News*.

<sup>54</sup> VA Sen. (2026). [\*Constitutional amendment; qualifications of voters and the right to vote; persons not entitled to vote\*](#) [HJ2, 2026 Sess.]; VA Sen. (2025). [\*Constitutional amendment; qualifications of voters and the right to vote; persons not entitled to vote\*](#) [HJ2, 2025 Sess.]; VA Sen. (2025). [\*Proposing an amendment to Section 1 of Article II of the Constitution of Virginia, relating to qualifications of voters; right to vote; persons not entitled to vote\*](#) [SJ 248, 2025 Sess.]. Senate of Virginia.

<sup>55</sup> As of 2024, there were 14,190 women in Virginia completing felony probation or parole. There were an additional 43,637 women who remained disenfranchised although they had completed the entirety of their sentence; Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>56</sup> Porter, N. D., & McLeod, M. [\*Expanding the vote: State felony disenfranchisement reform, 1997-2023\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>57</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>58</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>59</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>60</sup> Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>61</sup> Napal, D., & Budd, K. M. (2025). [\*Texas should restore voting rights to nearly half a million citizens\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Porter, N. D., & McLeod, M. [\*Expanding the vote: State felony disenfranchisement reform, 1997-2023\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>62</sup> Simpson, S. (2025, May 15). [\*Bill requiring air conditioning in all Texas prisons wins House approval\*](#). The Texas Tribune.

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<sup>64</sup> The 23 states that re-enfranchise their residents once they complete their prison or jail sentence for a felony-level conviction include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington state; Uggen, C., Larson, R., Shannon, S., Stewart, R., & Hauf, M. (2024). [\*Locked out 2024: Four million denied voting rights due to a felony conviction\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>65</sup> Life sentences include life without the possibility of parole, life with the possibility of parole, or a virtual life sentence (a sentence of 50 years or more); The Federal Bureau of Prisons is excluded in the count of women serving life, because the BOP did not provide demographic information for its life-sentenced population; Nellis, A., & Barry, C. (2026). [\*A matter of life: The scope and impact of life and long term imprisonment in the United States\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>66</sup> Nellis, A., & Barry, C. (2026). [\*A matter of life: The scope and impact of life and long term imprisonment in the United States\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>67</sup> Women completing misdemeanor-level sentences in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, and South Carolina are not eligible to vote during their incarceration. See Ahluwalia, B., & Hodder, C. (2026). [\*Felon voting laws by state: A rights restoration guide\*](#). FindLaw.

<sup>68</sup> Zeng, Z. (2025). [\*Jails report series: 2024 preliminary data release\*](#). Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>69</sup> In 2024, approximately 207,000 people in jail were convicted of an offense. Convictions include misdemeanor and felony-level offenses. Due to the structure of jail data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, we cannot disentangle how many women in jails are pre-trial/unconvicted or convicted of a misdemeanor versus felony. Their data is presented for the jail population as a whole; Zeng, Z. (2025). [\*Jails report series: 2024 preliminary data release\*](#). Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>70</sup> For these estimates, we assume that all women incarcerated in state facilities are residents of that state. In Maine, 197 women were imprisoned at the state-level and 17 within the Federal Bureau of Prisons; 117 women were imprisoned in Vermont at the state-level and 8 within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In Washington, DC, 78 women were held in the Federal Bureau of Prisons for DC Code violations. An unknown number were serving felony-level sentences in the DC jail. In Puerto Rico, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported 5,241 people were serving a sentence of one year or more. To estimate the number of women,

we used the percent of the female Puerto Rican prison population from the World Prison Brief (3.7%), arriving at a count of 194 women. An additional 52 Puerto Rican women were in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. DC Corrections Information Council. (2025). [\*Individuals incarcerated in the Bureau of Prisons under the DC Code\*](#); Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. (n.d.). [\*World prison brief: Puerto Rico\*](#). University of London, Birkbeck; Mueller, D., & Kluckow, R. (2025). [\*Prisoners in 2023 - Statistical tables\*](#). Bureau of Justice Statistics; Prison Policy Initiative. (2025). [\*Home states of people in the Bureau of Prisons facilities\*](#).

<sup>71</sup> De facto disenfranchisement: A person who retains their right to vote but is prevented from voting by logistical, administrative, economic, or social barriers. This includes voting from a prison or jail as well as voting in the community.

<sup>72</sup> Budd, K. M., & Didner-Jollie, R. (2025). [\*Voting from prison: Lessons from Maine and Vermont\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>73</sup> Budd, K. M., & Didner-Jollie, R. (2025). [\*Voting from prison: Lessons from Maine and Vermont\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

<sup>74</sup> Budd, K. M., & Didner-Jollie, R. (2025). [\*Voting from prison: Lessons from Maine and Vermont\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Budd, K. M., & Monazzam, N. (2023). [\*Increasing public safety by restoring voting rights\*](#). The Sentencing Project; Budd, K. M., & Pearce, S. (2026). [\*Learning life all over again: Reentry after long-term imprisonment\*](#). The Sentencing Project.

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<sup>76</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. (n.d.). [\*Democracy index 2025\*](#). The Economist Group.

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