

# Connecticut Should Restore Voting Rights to 11,000 Citizens

## Second Highest Rate of Felony Disenfranchisement in the Northeast

Connecticut denies the right to vote to the second highest percentage of its citizens among states in the Northeast.<sup>1</sup> Driving its regionally high rate is the state's exclusion of people on parole. Connecticut is the only state in the Northeast to extend voting restrictions beyond prison. In addition, two nearby states, Maine and Vermont, do not take away the vote due to felony convictions at all.<sup>2</sup> Black residents are disproportionately impacted by disenfranchisement laws due to significant racial disparities in Connecticut's incarceration and community supervision rates.

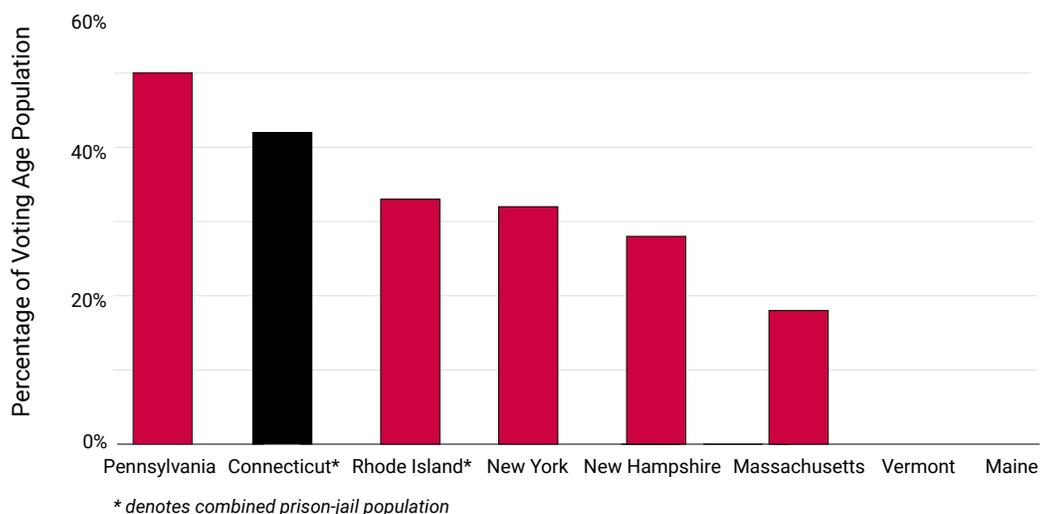
Excluding people on parole supervision from voting disenfranchises an additional 4,510 people and makes Connecticut an outlier. In 2018, New York Governor Cuomo restored voting rights to New Yorkers on parole via executive order. In 2020, California voters passed a ballot initiative restoring the right to vote for Californians on parole. Connecticut disenfranchises roughly the same number of people as Massachusetts, despite having only around half its population.<sup>3</sup>

Connecticut's disenfranchisement rate is further complicated by its combined prison-jail system, an arrangement shared by only 5 other states. Roughly 30% of the state's incarcerated population is unsentenced or held on misdemeanors meaning they are likely eligible to vote, yet research suggests that eligible voters face significant bureaucratic barriers, resulting in additional *de facto* disenfranchisement.<sup>4</sup> Connecticut should extend voting rights to all people affected by the state's criminal legal system.

## Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice Create Racial Disparities in Disenfranchisement

Connecticut's voting laws disproportionately disenfranchise people of color because people of color are overrepresented in the state's criminal justice system. While Connecticut is only 12% African American, 44% of its incarcerated population is African American. Latinxs make up 27% of incarcerated people, but only 17% of the state's population as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 70% of people on parole are Black or Latinx, even though the state is 66% white.<sup>6</sup> High felony disenfranchisement rates among communities

People Disenfranchised Due to Felony Conviction, 2020



of color can also deter household and community members from voting due to an overall decline in electoral engagement and ambiguities in eligibility, further diluting their political representation.

Differential contact at all levels of the criminal justice system drives racial disparities in felony disenfranchisement. The state has narrowed but not yet eliminated disparities in police traffic stops.<sup>7</sup> A recent report by the state's Office of Policy and Management found that whites, who make up two-thirds of the state's population, account for about one-third of felony dispositions.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, 40% of individuals who were granted parole were white, whereas whites made up just 30% of people in state prisons that same year.<sup>7</sup>

### **Supporting Voting Rights Improves Public Safety**

Research suggests that re-enfranchisement can facilitate successful re-entry and reduce recidivism. University of Minnesota's Christopher Uggen and New York University's Jeff Manza find that among people with a prior arrest, there are "consistent differences between voters and non-voters in rates of subsequent arrest, incarceration, and self-reported criminal behavior."<sup>10</sup> Granting universal suffrage can improve public safety.

### **Connecticut Can Strengthen Its Democracy by Expanding the Right to Vote**

Connecticut can and should strengthen its democracy by granting voting rights to people in prison and on parole.

Voting reforms do not necessarily favor one political party, meaning support for increased voting access should garner bipartisan support. A 2020 survey conducted by the *Marshall Project* and *Slate* found that a plurality of white people in prison supported Donald Trump. While data on the party affiliations of people in prison is limited, such evidence undercuts claims that restoring the vote will only benefit a single political party.<sup>11</sup>

Policymakers should build on recent advocacy efforts by ending felony disenfranchisement. The Connecticut Sentencing Commission and other organizations have already voiced their support for ending parole disenfranchisement.<sup>12</sup> Expanding access to the vote

for all people affected by the criminal legal system would strengthen Connecticut's democracy and erase racial disparities in political representation.

## Endnotes

1. Connecticut's prison disenfranchisement rate was calculated in part using data from the Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School. Based on analysis of the DOC roster count on 9/17/20, 3,054 people of the 9,588 people incarcerated in that month were detained pretrial or were only serving a sentence for a misdemeanor offense—and therefore 6,534 individuals were ineligible to vote due to incarceration for a felony sentence. An additional 4,510 people on parole in Connecticut are disenfranchised. In total, 11,044 people or 0.42% of the state's voting age population are disenfranchised. See, Connecticut Department of Corrections. 2020. "[Monthly Statistics, September 1, 2020](#)"; Connecticut Office of Policy and Management: Criminal Justice Policy & Planning Division. 2021. "[Monthly Indicators Report: January 2021](#)."
2. Chris Uggen, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon, and Arleth Pulido-Nava. 2020. [Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction](#). Washington: The Sentencing Project.
3. E. Anne Carson. 2020. "[Prisoners in 2019](#)." Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Vera Institute. 2019. [Incarceration Trends in Connecticut](#).
4. The Connecticut Sentencing Commission found that many DOC staff and nearly all eligible incarcerated voters were unaware that a significant portion of people in state facilities were eligible to vote. See, Sam Kuhn, et al. 2020. "[Improving Access to Voting in Connecticut Prison and Jails](#)." Connecticut: Connecticut Sentencing Commission.
5. U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. [QuickFacts: Connecticut](#); Connecticut Department of Corrections. 2021. "[Monthly Statistics, December 1, 2020](#)."
6. U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. [QuickFacts: Connecticut](#); Connecticut Department of Corrections. 2021. "[Monthly Statistics, December 1, 2020](#)."
7. Ryan Lindsay. (2020, May 6). [Racial Disparities in Traffic Stops Decrease, But Inequalities Remain](#). *Connecticut Public Radio*.
8. Marc Pelka and Kyle Baudoin. Office of Policy & Management Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division. 2020. "[First Analysis of Prosecutor Data \(PA 19-59\): 2020 Report to the Criminal Justice Commission](#)."
9. Connecticut Board of Pardons and Parole. 2020. "[Board of Pardons and Parole Statistical Information](#)"; Connecticut Department of Corrections. 2019. "[Monthly Statistics, December 1, 2019](#)."
10. Christopher Uggen and Jeff Manza. 2004. "Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample." *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36(1), 193-216.
11. Nicole Lewis, Aviva Shen and Anna Flagg. (2020, March 13). [What Do We Really Know About the Politics of People Behind Bars?](#). *The Marshall Project*.
12. Connecticut Sentencing Commission. 2020. "[Projects and Initiatives](#)."