

[WASHINGTON REPORT]

SHOULD EVERY VOTE COUNT?

Nearly 1.4 million black men have no political voice

he struggle for voting rights has been a long one in the black community. From literacy tests to Jim Crow laws, blacks in America have had much to overcome to gain power at the polls. Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-Ohio) says many blacks are still being unfairly denied the right to vote—ex-offenders.

A part of the Count Every Vote Act, Tubbs Jones has introduced legislation that will give ex-offenders the right to vote in federal elections upon completion of their sentence. She believes laws denying ex-offenders voting rights contradict the idea of democracy. "If you don't vote, you lose your voice," she says. "If we believe in a system of justice, and people have paid their debt to society, then they're entitled to be re-enfranchised."

According to The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice policy research and advocacy organization, 1.4 million African American

David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies says this type of legislation has proved unsuccessful in the past and most likely will not garner much support in this Congress. Bositis says many in the Republican majority see felony disenfranchisement as a partisan debate, not a voting rights issue: "The majority of ex-felons are African Americans. They would most likely vote Democrat. So why would Republicans help Democrats?" Others, he notes, simply believe it's unfair for someone who broke the law to have voting privileges again.

Bositis also believes that any significant changes to ex-felon voting policy will be made at the state, not federal, level because each state has the power to determine who is qualified to vote. Several state legislatures have already debated or passed laws changing felon voting rights. This summer, Iowa's governor issued an executive

Categories of Felons Who Cannot Vote (States with most disenfranchised black male felons)

STATE	PRISONERS	PROBATIONERS	PAROLEES	EX-FELONS	TOTAL BLACK MALE DISENFRANCHISED FELONS
Alabama	X	X	X	certain offenses	105,000
California	X	X	X		69,500
Florida	X	X	X	X	204,600
Georgia	X	X	X		66,400
Illinois	X	X	X		24,100
Maryland	X	X	X	for 3 years/2nd felony	67,900
Michigan	X	X	X		22,700
Mississippi	X	X	X	certain offenses	81,700
Missouri	X	X	X		20,100
New Jersey	X	X	X		65,200
New York	X	X	X		62,700
North Carolina	X	X	X		46,900
Ohio	X	X	X		23,800
South Carolina	X	X	X		26,100
Tennessee	X	X	X	convicted post-1981	38,300
Texas	X	X	X		156,600
Virginia	X	X	X	X	110,000
U.S. Total	49	31	36	13*	1,367,100

* INCLUDES STATES WITH PARTIAL RESTRICTIONS; SOURCE: THE SENTENCING PROJECT

Number Of Inmates In State Or Federal Prisons And Local Jails (June 30, 2004)

Total Male
1,947,800

White Male
695,800

Black Male
842,500

Hispanic Male
366,800

Total Female
183,400

White Female
81,700

Black Female
67,700

Hispanic Female
28,600

men have lost the right to vote as a result of felony convictions—a rate nearly seven times higher than all U.S. felons.

While 38 states (including the District of Columbia) allow ex-felons to vote, three states impose lifetime bans for all ex-felons, and 10 regulate which ex-felons will regain voting privileges or when they will be allowed to vote again. Maine and Vermont, which have some of the lowest black populations in the country, are the only states that allow all current and former felons to vote.

Tubbs Jones' proposal, co-sponsored by Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), is the latest attempt to restore voting rights to ex-felons. Tubbs Jones says denying felons the right to vote helps put former convicts on the wrong track.

order repealing permanent disenfranchisement for ex-offenders in the Hawkeye state. But so far, Congress has not enacted any such legislation.

The NAACP argues that there is a federal responsibility to ensure voter rights. "Since the right to vote is a federal one, it calls for a federal remedy," says NAACP General Counsel Dennis Courtland Hayes. Hayes notes that the NAACP is currently involved in litigation that would ensure that blacks who have paid their debt to society are able to vote.

Tubbs Jones remains hopeful that her bill will succeed. "My colleagues who choose not to support the bill cannot talk about freedom around the world if they don't deal with making every vote count in the United States."

—Reniqua Allen