



March 19, 2015

## Cosponsor H.R. 1459, the Democracy Restoration Act

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations, we write to urge you to cosponsor the Democracy Restoration Act of 2015 (H.R. 1459), introduced today by Representative John Conyers (D-MI). H.R. 1459 would restore voting rights in federal elections to formerly incarcerated people who are living and working in our communities.

The Leadership Conference believes passage of this bill is critical to achieving and maintaining an inclusive democracy. Historically, the United States has left the decision of who can vote in federal elections to be legislated by individual states. This practice has created a patchwork of inconsistent and unfair laws that discriminate and disenfranchise people with criminal records, further marginalizing racial minorities from the electoral process. As a coalition that is committed to supporting and expanding the civil rights, including critically important voting rights of all Americans, we strongly support passage of this legislation.

Currently, an estimated 5.85 million American citizens are denied the right to vote because they have a criminal conviction in their past. Four million of these people are out of prison, living in the community, paying taxes, and raising families; yet they remain disenfranchised for years, often decades, and sometimes for life. Felony disenfranchisement laws are rooted in the post-Civil War era and were used to prevent freed slaves from voting. These laws still have a significant racial impact. About one of every 13 African-Americans in this country are denied the right to vote by criminal disenfranchisement laws, which is more than seven times the rate for the population as a whole. Furthermore, studies indicate that former prisoners who have voting rights restored are less likely to reoffend, and that disenfranchisement hinders their rehabilitation and reintegration into their community. Congressional action is needed to restore voting rights in federal elections to the millions of Americans who have been released from incarceration, but continue to be denied their ability to fully participate in civic life. Passage of the Democracy Restoration Act is an important means to that end.

In this country, voting is a national symbol of equality and full citizenship. Eliminating the voting rights of our citizens—rights for which many have given their lives—is against the very basic principles upon which our country was founded. Democracy is strengthened when as many citizens as possible have the right to vote.

Passage of the Democracy Restoration Act (DRA) will ensure all Americans have access to the electoral process. It is past time that Congress automatically restores individual voting rights in federal elections to people who have paid their debt to society. We urge you to

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cosponsor H.R. 1459. If you have any questions or wish further information, please contact Sakira Cook, Counsel, at 202-263-2894 or [cook@civilrights.org](mailto:cook@civilrights.org).

Sincerely,



Wade Henderson  
President & CEO



Nancy Zirkin  
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