



March 19, 2015

Support S.772, the Democracy Restoration Act

Dear Senator:

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 support the Democracy Restoration Act of 2015 (S. 772), introduced yesterday by Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), and Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee Patrick Leahy (D-VT). S.772 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.

Officers

Chair

Judith L. Lichtman
National Partnership for
Women & Families

Vice Chairs

Jacqueline Pata
National Congress of American Indians
Thomas A. Saenz
Mexican American Legal
Defense and Educational Fund
Hilary Shelton
NAACP

Treasurer

Lee A. Saunders
American Federation of State,
County & Municipal Employees

Board of Directors

Barbara Arnwine
Lawyers' Committee for
Civil Rights Under Law
Cornell William Brooks
NAACP
Lily Eskelsen Garcia
National Education Association
Marcia D. Greenberger
National Women's Law Center
Chad Griffin
Human Rights Campaign
Linda D. Hallman
AAUW
Mary Kay Henry
Service Employees International Union

Sherrilyn Ifill
NAACP Legal Defense and
Educational Fund, Inc.
Jo Ann Jenkins
AARP

Michael B. Keegan
People for the American Way
Elisabeth MacNamara
League of Women Voters of the
United States
Marc Morial
National Urban League

Mee Moua
Asian Americans Advancing Justice |
AAJC
Janet Murguía
National Council of La Raza

Debra Ness
National Partnership for
Women & Families
Mary Rose Oakar
American-Arab
Anti-Discrimination Committee

Terry O'Neill
National Organization for Women
Priscilla Ouchida
Japanese American Citizens League
Mark Perriello
American Association of
People with Disabilities

Rabbi Jonah Pesner
Religious Action Center
Of Reform Judaism
Anthony Romero
American Civil Liberties Union
Shanna Smith
National Fair Housing Alliance

Richard L. Trumka
AFL-CIO
Randi Weingarten
American Federation of Teachers
Dennis Williams
International Union, UAW

Policy and Enforcement

Committee Chair

Michael Lieberman
Anti-Defamation League

President & CEO

Wade J. Henderson
Executive Vice President & COO
Karen McGill Lawson



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 support the passage of S. 772. If you have any questions or wish further information, please contact Sakira Cook, Counsel, at 202-263-2894 or cook@civilrights.org.

Sincerely,



Wade Henderson
President & CEO



Nancy Zirkin
Executive Vice President