

September 6, 2023

David McGuire, Chair
Venesia Hurtubise, Vice-Chair
Connecticut Advisory Committee
U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

Chair McGuire, Vice-chair Hurtubise and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of overturning all forms of voter disenfranchisement in our state.

I am the Director of the Nancy A Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work and an Instructor in Residence at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Broadly, we examine the connections between voting and community outcomes, promote civic engagement as an intervention in social work practice, conduct research, advocate to expand voting rights and access, and develop training models to increase political participation within the profession and the communities and populations we serve. Social workers touch 12 million lives a day in organizations, schools, communities and public agencies, and are well positioned to support a more inclusive democracy, including engaging those who have been historically excluded from political power (Abramovitz et al, 2019).

Voting is about relationships, including people's relationship to their government, their relationship and connection to their community, and even their relationship to the person asking them to vote.

My testimony will bring a social work perspective to this conversation in terms of the impact on well-being, political power, and outcomes, as well as the challenges in engaging a population that votes at the lowest rates. I will also share a few preliminary findings from a participatory research study with the Full Citizens Coalition that included focus groups with formerly incarcerated individuals about their experience, attitudes, and beliefs about voting.

Voter turnout and community outcomes

In 2022, the American Medical Association declared voting a social determinant of health (Bajaj, 2022). Communities that vote in higher rates are better off in numerous and important measures of well-being, including higher and better employment, stronger social connections, life expectancy, education, and more (Kansas Civic Health Foundation, 2016; Ballard et al, 2018; Raza et al. 2020; Martin, 2003; Martin & Claiburn, 2013; Raza et al, 2020).

Voting in late adolescence and early adulthood is associated with decreased risky health behaviors, higher socioeconomic status in adulthood, more years of education and higher personal earnings. (Ballard et al, 2018)

The Health and Democracy Index developed by the Healthy Democracy Healthy People Initiative, a nonpartisan coalition of major public health and civic engagement groups working to advance civic participation and public health, presents twelve indicators of health and well-being and correlates them to voting policies using the Cost of Voting Index. In general, states that make voting easier score higher on health indicators. (Healthy Democracy Index, 2021)

Additionally, civic participation has been linked with lower recidivism rates (Florida Parole Commission study, 2010;). In one study, the recidivism rate for voters was 15% lower than nonvoters. (Uggen & Manza, 2004)

Voter Turnout and power

Voter turnout matters. Numerous studies show that elected officials give more attention and more resources to voters, and this effect may be even greater on the local level (Hajnal, 2010; Hajnal & Lewis, 2003). Consistently, Hartford, Bridgeport, and other cities with the highest rates of justice involvement have some of the lowest rates of voter participation (Gerber et al, 2015). In local elections, it's common for turnout in these communities to be under 20% of registered voters (Election Results, n.d.) so that small percentage of the population that votes has outsized (and often toxic) political power and voice. Particularly when primaries in these cities can be more important than the general election.

Look at voter turnout by district, and it's easy to see a relationship between higher rates of voter turnout and where community resources are directed. Overlay incarceration rates and arrest data and see the inverse relationship, lack of access to jobs, community investments, and more. (Widra. 2022)

These voting deserts are significant because voting is a highly relational activity. So when we think about a policy like felony disenfranchisement, we have to see its multiplying effect into the civic life and political power of families and communities as well as their outcomes.

Importance of full emancipation

Felony disenfranchisement laws are set at the state level, creating a dizzying maze of eligibility laws and access to voting (Brennan Center, 2019; Doleac et al, 2022; Uggen et al, 2016). These and other structural barriers feed and reinforce the engagement barriers and the intentional myth that voting doesn't matter.

Most people affected by these laws and even those that work directly with this population, do not know if or when people with a felony can vote. The risk of being wrong is high with a penalty of up to 5 years in prison and \$5,000 fine. (CT Form ED-670, Rev. 9/15). The language itself on both the paper and online voter registration system is likely to intimidate most people with a conviction who might be worried about reoffending:

WARNING: If you sign this statement even though you know it is untrue, you can be convicted and imprisoned for up to five years and fined up to \$5,000. or giving wrong information away from registering to vote

Before this warning is an eligibility statement that can also be intimidating and confusing: ***“I have not been convicted of a disfranchising felony, or, if so, I am eligible to register to vote.”*** (CT Form ED-670, Rev. 9/15).

“Third Citizens” Participatory Research Project

I referenced this study earlier and would like to share some very preliminary findings of a participatory research project we are conducting in collaboration with the Full Citizens Coalition. A primary aim of this project is to co-transform a voter engagement curriculum that reflects the needs and preferences of formerly incarcerated individuals.

We have conducted five focus groups with formerly incarcerated men and women across the state and are in the process of coding the text toward a thematic analysis. Understanding their beliefs, experiences, and barriers to voting is critical in designing policies and programs that invite them into civic life that instills and supports a sense of belonging, self-determination, and political agency.

I will share this from our preliminary coding of these conversations:

- Felony disenfranchisement is viewed not as an isolated incident but part of a historical campaign of electoral exclusion. It’s one part of a larger system intended to suppress the vote and political power of people of color.
- Participants valued being re-enfranchised even if they don’t currently vote. We heard confusion about the electoral process and a desire to learn more. They referenced programming that was supposed to set them up for re-entry but then they were suddenly released.
- One of many paradoxes that continued to arise in conversation was both an apathy and hopelessness about voting resulting in any change that would benefit people like them AND an acknowledgement and even excitement and hopefulness about voting.
- A disillusionment with politicians who don’t prioritize their needs or the significant challenges they face in re-entering society. They may ask for their vote if they see them at all but disappear after the election.
- The material reality of their lives makes it difficult to engage civically. Many want more information but don’t know where to start. (Singh, S. et al)

As researchers we left these conversations feeling energized. In every one, participants asked us to come back. They wanted more engagement and information, and some followed us out of the room speaking about their hopes for their kids and the desire for a fresh start and better future.

Closing

Promoting civic engagement while individuals are incarcerated gives us an opportunity to strengthen community ties and build civic IQ before people are released so when they leave prison, they already have the practice and power of being a voter, a better understanding of their government, and the skills to engage in civic life. This positive engagement can promote conversations with families and plant seeds of civic connection in communities.

Full enfranchisement would end widespread misinformation as well as the administrative voter suppression that happens today for the 40% of incarcerated individuals that have the right to vote in pre-trial detention.

Ending felony disenfranchisement requires public education and a narrative that focuses on successful re-entry, public safety, and community well-being.

I am happy to share the full findings of our research when it is complete.

Thank you for your time and attention on this critical issue.

References

- Abramovitz, M., Sherraden, M., Hill, K., Rhodes Smith, T., Lewis, B., & Mizrahi, T. (2019). Voting is Social Work: Voices From the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 55(4), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656690>
- Bajaj, S. (2022, July 14). Voting is significant determinant of health, US medical association declares. *The Guardian*.
- Behrens, A., Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2003). Ballot manipulation and the “Menace of negro domination”: Racial threat and felon disenfranchisement in the United States, 1850–2002. *American Journal of Sociology*, 109(3), 559–605. <https://doi.org/10.1086/378647>
- Blakely, T., Kennedy B, & Kawachi I. (2001) Socioeconomic inequality in voting participation and self-rated health. *American Journal Public Health*. 91, 99-104. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.91.1.99>.
- Claibourn, M. P. (2013). Voting's Rewards: Voter Turnout, Attentive Publics, and Congressional Allocation of Federal Money. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 38(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12003>
- Doleac, J. L., Eckhouse, L., Foster-Moore, E., Harris, A., Walker, H., & White, A. (2022). Registering returning citizens to vote. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4031676>
- Domenech Rodríguez, M. M., Baumann, A. A., & Schwartz, A. L. (2011). Cultural adaptation of an evidence based intervention: From theory to practice in a Latino/a community context. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 47(1-2), 170–186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9371-4>
- Election Results. (n.d.). CT.gov - Connecticut’s Official State Website. Retrieved March 6, 2023, from <https://portal.ct.gov/SOTS/Election-Services/Election-Results/Election-Results>
- Flavin, P. (2014). Direct democracy and political equality in the American States*. *Social Science Quarterly*, 96(1), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12106>
- Florida parole - fcor.state.fl.us. Florida Parole Commission . (2011, July 11). Retrieved from <https://fcor.state.fl.us/docs/reports/2009-2010ClemencyReport.pdf>

- Gerber, A. S., Huber, G. A., Meredith, M., Biggers, D. R., & Hendry, D. J. (2015). Can incarcerated felons be (re)integrated into the political system? results from a field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(4), 912–926. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12166>
- Hajnal, Z. (2010). *Race, Turnout and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Health & Democracy Index. Healthy Democracy Healthy People. 2021. Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://democracyindex.hdhp.us/>
- Hill, K., Rhodes Smith, T., Lane, S. R., & Shannon, S. (2020). Giving a voice to those with felony convictions: A call to action. *Social Work*, 65(4), 406–408. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa036>
- Leighley, J. E., & Nagler, J. (2014). Two demographics of turnout. *Who Votes Now?*, 16–51. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400848621-006>
- Manza, J., Uggen, C., & Brooks, C. (2006). Public opinion and felon disenfranchisement. *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy*, 205–219. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195149326.003.0050>
- Martin, P. S. (2003). Voting's rewards: Voter turnout, attentive publics, and Congressional allocation of Federal Money. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(1), 110–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5907.00008>
- Martin, P. S., & Claibourn, M. P. (2013). Citizen participation and congressional responsiveness: New evidence that participation matters. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 38(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12003>
- Raza, D., Brown, C. & Pinto, A. (2020). Supporting patients to shape social determinants of health through democratic engagement. *Canadian Family Physician*, 66, 639-641.
- Singh, S, Rhodes Smith, T., Adler, J. & Valenzuela, F. (2023). Building Political Power with “Third Citizens:” Centering Critical Consciousness in the Transformation & Pilot Implementation of the Voter Engagement Model with Formerly Incarcerated Individuals [Focus groups] [Unpublished raw data]. University of Connecticut.
- Uggen, C., & Manza, J. (2004). Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 36, 193-215.
- Uggen, C., Fetting, A., & Porter, N. D. (2021, August 13). Locked out 2020: Estimates of people denied voting rights due to a felony conviction. The Sentencing Project. Retrieved from <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>
- Widra, E. (2022). Where people in prison come from: The geography of mass incarceration in Connecticut. In Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/origin/ct/2020/report.html>