

“But I’m A Felon,” by Dr. Chris Jones

Restoring Voting Rights for Felons in Arkansas: A Path to Redemption

In Arkansas, more than 5,000 citizens are locked out of their most fundamental democratic right—the right to vote—due to past felony convictions. This deliberate process of locking them out, not only silences their voices but undermines the values of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The Problem of Felon Disenfranchisement

Under Arkansas law, individuals convicted of a felony automatically lose their voting rights. These rights can only be restored after they have completed their full sentence, including probation, parole, and payment of any associated fines or fees. This process, while legally sound, creates significant barriers that prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from fully participating in civic life.

Many people with felony convictions are unaware of the steps needed to restore their voting rights. **THEY JUST DON’T KNOW.** Some believe that their rights are permanently revoked, while others face administrative hurdles when attempting to restore them. As a result, **thousands of people who have paid their debt to society remain disenfranchised.**

This issue disproportionately affects communities of color. Data from the *University of Arkansas at Little Rock* highlights that African American Arkansans are incarcerated at higher rate than other groups, making them more likely to lose their voting rights. The long-term effects of this disenfranchisement include decreased political representation, further marginalization, and a diminished sense of belonging within society.

Arkansas currently ranks last in the nation in voter registration and turnout. A 2024 study highlights that our state is lagging when it comes to civic engagement. The disenfranchisement of felons plays a significant role in this problem. When a large segment of the population is left out of the democratic process, it weakens the overall health of the state’s democracy. Addressing this issue is critical to improving both voter registration and turnout in Arkansas.

Restoring Rights: A Hopeful Solution

There is hopeful news. Arkansas does provide a pathway for voting rights restoration. Once a former felon has completed their sentence, they can petition the court or the county clerk to have their rights reinstated. For example, in Pulaski County, under the leadership of Clerk Terri Hollingsworth, the voter registration department works with individuals to navigate this process, ensuring that eligible citizens can once again participate in elections.

Many people and organizations are doing the work:

1. The **ACLU of Arkansas** has been instrumental in raising awareness about these rights and advocating for more accessible pathways for restoration. *The ACLU Voting After a Criminal Conviction guide* offers critical resources for individuals seeking to regain their voting rights.
2. **DecARcerate Arkansas** is actively pushing for reforms in the criminal justice system.
3. The **Arkansas Criminal Justice Reform Coalition** is educating the public on the importance of voting rights restoration and advocating for policy changes to simplify the process. These groups emphasize that restoring voting rights isn't just a legal matter—it's a moral imperative.

People who have served their time deserve the opportunity to participate in the decisions that shape their communities.

Their Reengagement Benefits Everyone

Restoring voting rights is more than a symbolic act. It's a key part of the rehabilitation process that helps individuals reintegrate into society. Studies have shown that former felons who are able to vote are less likely to reoffend, as they feel more connected to their communities and invested in their futures. Voting gives people a voice, a sense of agency, and an opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves.

Voter restoration benefits society. It strengthens democracy by ensuring that every citizen has a say in how their government operates. It also helps communities by

encouraging civic participation among those who have been historically left out. Allowing felons to vote reduces the stigma associated with incarceration and fosters a more inclusive and just society.

Here's How YOU Can Make a Difference

- 1. Raise Awareness:** Share information about voting rights restoration with your community.
- 2. Support Local Organizations:** Donate to or volunteer with organizations that are working to restore voting rights for felons and advocate for criminal justice reform.
- 3. Encourage Registration:** If you know someone who has completed their sentence, guide them through the process of restoring their voting rights. Resources like the **Get Loud Arkansas** and Vote.gov provide clear instructions on how to register once rights are restored.
- 4. Speak up for Change:** Contact your state legislators and local officials and urge them to support measures that make it easier for felons to regain their rights.
- 5. Vote:** Every election is an opportunity to shape the future. Make your voice heard and encourage others to do the same. When more people vote, democracy thrives. **Early voting in starts on October 21, 2024, and the election is on November 5, 2024!**

By working together, we can ensure that every Arkansan—regardless of their past—has the chance to be heard and to help shape the future of our state. It's time to restore voting rights for all.

Arkansas deserves better, and it's up to us to make it happen.

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.