

OPINION

Millions of Americans Will Be Left Behind in the Upcoming Midterms

NICOLE D. PORTER, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY, THE SENTENCING PROJECT

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As this year's midterm elections approach, millions of Americans will be barred from casting their ballot. According to a [new report](#) from The Sentencing Project, more than 4.6 million people will not be able to vote this year due to a current or previous felony conviction.

That's one out of every 50 adults.

This is an unacceptable stain on our democracy. We cannot continue to allow states to take away our citizens' right to the ballot.

Unfortunately, disenfranchisement is nothing new. We are guided by history. During the Jim Crow era, officials used poll taxes and literacy tests to disenfranchise Black residents. Today, this insidious practice continues in the form of felony disenfranchisement.

There is a clear racial impact to this practice. Today, one in 19 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate 3.5 times greater than that of non-African Americans. At the same time, African American disenfranchisement rates vary significantly by state. In eight states—Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia—more than one in 10 African American adults is disenfranchised.

Although data on ethnicity in correctional populations are still unevenly reported, we can conservatively estimate that at least 506,000 Latinx Americans—or 1.7 percent of the voting eligible population—are disenfranchised. Moreover, approximately 1,000,000 women are disenfranchised, comprising over one-fifth of the total disenfranchised population.



Stickers sit on the ballot box at a polling place during early voting on Oct. 25, 2022, in Milwaukee, Wis. SCOTT OLSON/GETTY

IMAGES

There is also the particularly troubling case of Florida, where research estimates that over 934,500 Floridians who have completed their

sentences remain disenfranchised—despite a [2018 ballot referendum](#) that promised to restore their voting rights. Florida likely remains the nation's disenfranchisement leader in absolute numbers, with almost 1.2 million people currently banned from voting, often because they cannot afford to pay court-ordered monetary sanctions. In recent days, we've also seen shocking videos coming out of Florida showing state police arresting citizens for alleged "[voter fraud](#)." These arrests and prosecutions are moving forward even though the state of Florida informed these citizens that they were eligible to vote, and provided no mechanism for these individuals to learn whether they still owed outstanding fines and fees related to their original convictions. At the same time, there is good news. Less people are disenfranchised than there were in 2020, when an estimated 5.2 million people were barred from voting due to felony disenfranchisement. This development comes as many states have expanded the right to vote for justice-impacted individuals. For example, earlier this year in Virginia, [Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin restored voting rights](#) to almost 3,500 people with former felony convictions. Additionally, [new polling from Lake Research Partners](#) showed that the majority of Americans who are likely voters believe that voting should be a guaranteed right for all—including for persons completing their sentence inside and outside of prison.

Nevertheless, several other states—particularly those in the Southeast—have retained such restrictions, and their disenfranchised populations have increased commensurate with the expansion of the criminal legal system.

As we embark on one of the most important elections of our lifetime, felony disenfranchisement should be at the heart of the public agenda. We must confront the forces that seek to suppress the vote and keep the members of our most vulnerable communities from casting a ballot. America works best when everyone has a voice—not when the state takes away our citizens' right to vote.

Nicole D. Porter is senior director of advocacy for The Sentencing Project.