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## ACS Issue Brief Urges Restoring Ex-Felons' Voting Rights

*Authors Endorse "Democracy Restoration Act,"  
Now Pending on Capitol Hill*

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*Washington, D.C.* – Too many Americans are denied the right to vote because of laws that disenfranchise individuals with criminal records, write the authors of a new ACS Issue Brief, who urge passage of proposed federal legislation to restore their voting rights.

Of the 5.3 million Americans barred from voting because of criminal convictions, nearly 4 million of them are out of prison, working, paying taxes and raising families, report Deborah J. Vagins, legislative counsel for the Washington Legislative Office of the American Civil Liberties Union, and Erika Wood, deputy director of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice.

In "The Democracy Restoration Act: Addressing a Centuries-Old Injustice," the authors urge enactment of the federal Democracy Restoration Act "to restore voting rights to millions of American citizens in federal elections and to finally redress a centuries-old injustice."

They continue, "Many of these criminal disfranchisement laws are rooted in the Jim Crow era, and were created with the purpose of barring African Americans from voting. The impact of these laws continues today. Nationwide, 13% of African American men have lost the right to vote as a result of a criminal conviction – a rate seven times the national average."

The authors note that 21 states have eased voting restrictions against ex-felons since 1997. Vagins and Wood warn, however, that "[w]hile these reforms indicate a positive trend towards reforming felon disfranchisement laws, the patchwork of varying state requirements across the country continues to cause widespread and persistent confusion among election officials, criminal justice professionals, and the public."

The Democracy Restoration Act, which is sponsored by Sen. Russ Feingold and Rep. John Conyers, would alleviate this confusion, according to the authors. The Act is pending on Capitol Hill, and was recently the subject of a heated hearing before the U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

“A democracy’s strength is derived from broad civic engagement and election participation,” Vagins and Wood conclude. “Yet, the United States is one of the few western democratic nations to exclude such large numbers of people from the democratic process.”

This calls for enactment of the Democracy Restoration Act, Vagins and Wood write, which is the next frontier in America’s history of “successful struggles to expand the franchise to include those previously barred from the electorate because of race, class, or gender.”

Vagins’ and Wood’s ACS Issue Brief is [available here](#). Please contact the ACS Communications Department to arrange interviews with the authors.

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