

Transactive Discussion: Felon Disenfranchisement

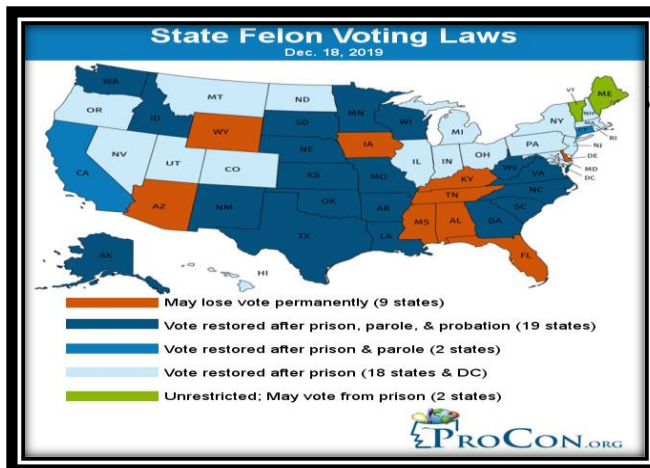
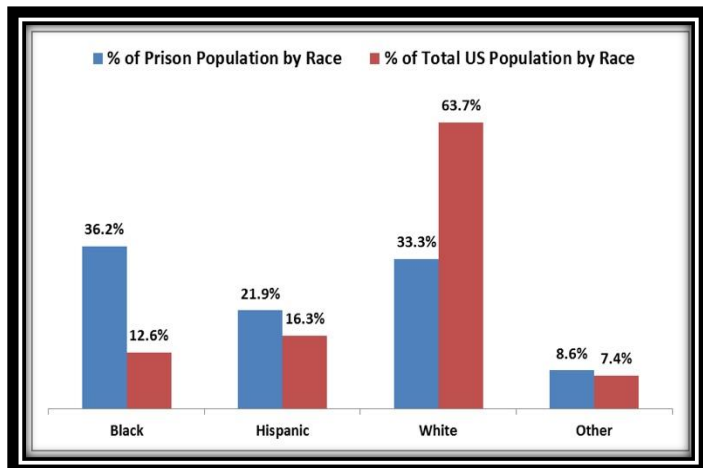
Please read the following prompt and quotes. In small groups, discuss the questions below.

Voting is one of the most important ways a person can participate in a democracy. A person can elect someone who will fight for their interests in different levels of government through voting. While many countries in the world use voting to elect government officials, different countries have different laws about who can vote. The United States is one of the strictest guidelines for voting, especially for those who have been convicted of felony.

Prohibiting felons from voting is referred to as felony disenfranchisement. In 2016, over six million Americans had lost the right to vote due to a felony conviction.¹ Many people argue that felony disenfranchisement is a form of voter suppression because voting is a right you should be guaranteed as a U.S. citizen. In addition, some claim that these laws are unfair because they disproportionately affect people of color who are more likely to be felons due to past and present policies that unfairly target communities of color. For example, African American and Hispanic defendants are charged more often with crimes that require mandatory sentencing, placing them in jail at higher rates than White people. These laws, in part, have led to people of color, especially Black men, to be disproportionately over represented in the criminal justice system. As a result, 1 out of every 13 Black males is unable to vote, compared to 1 out of 56 White male voters. Those who support disenfranchising people who have committed crimes claim that voting is a privilege. They often argue that if someone breaks the law in society that they should be denied the ability to civically engage and vote on decisions that affect others.



¹ A felony is defined as- a crime, typically one involving violence, regarded as more serious than a misdemeanor, and usually punishable by imprisonment for more than one year or by death; <https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/felony-disenfranchisement/>.



“If you won’t follow the law yourself, then you can’t make the law for everyone else, which is what you do – directly or indirectly – when you vote. The right to vote can be restored to felons, but it should be done carefully, on a case-by-case basis after a person has shown that he or she has really turned over a new leaf, not automatically on the day someone walks out of prison. The unfortunate truth is that most people who walk out of prison will be walking back in.”

- Roger Clegg, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Attorney

“Once a person has served their time, they should not be made to continue paying for their past mistakes... The quicker you allow a person to re-integrate into society, the less likely they are to recommit crime. It's giving a person a stake in the community. If you ostracize a person or effect barriers to successful reentry, you increase the likelihood of their committing new offenses.”

-Desmond Meade, president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition

Discussion Questions

- Given what you have read, including the quotes above, which perspective on this topic do you align with more, and why?
- Using answers from Question #1, can you integrate the two perspectives or find a compromise between the two positions?
 - If not, why?
 - If so, what would the solution look like?