

Oregonians with felonies – you can vote! (and why you should)

BY DENISE WELCH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

There has been a lot of national news coverage lately about attempts to change voting laws in a-number of states. Many of the laws seem to be designed to keep certain categories of people away from the polls: the elderly, the poor, minorities.

One barrier to voting that has existed across the country since the founding of our Republic is limiting or outright denying – sometimes forever – the right to vote of people who have felony convictions. In fact, the first disenfranchisement laws in America appeared in the 1600s, typically as punishment for morality crimes such as drunkenness.

Oregon is one of only 13 states (along with the District of Columbia), however, that automatically restores voting rights to persons with felony convictions when they are released from prison. Let me repeat that: In Oregon, voting rights are automatically restored when a person with a felony conviction is released from prison (and they can vote for federal as well as state candidates and issues, despite an abundance of misinformation people may have heard). It does not matter whether a person is on probation or parole; he or she can still vote in Oregon.

This isn't the case for much of the country. Today, there are more than 5 million Americans denied the right to vote because of various state laws that prohibit voting by people with felony convictions. And more than 2 million of them are formerly incarcerated people who have completed their sentences. It is particularly disturbing that because of racial disparities in the criminal justice system, it is

estimated that about 13 percent of black men are unable to vote.

Why voting is important

PSJ knows the importance of every single vote and how close some elections have been. Did you know that George W. Bush became the 43rd president of the United States when he won the state of Florida by 537 votes in the 2000 election? In 2004, now-Secretary of State Kate Brown won her state senate seat by only 40 votes.

When the United States Constitution was written, only white male property owners over the age of 21 (about 10-16 percent of the nation's population) could vote. Amendments to the Constitution in subsequent years expanded the right to most adults over 18 years of age.

As long as our country has existed, there have been people who didn't want everyone to have the vote. There were many freedom fighters who stood up for voting rights for all, often risking their lives to do so. Those times may seem ancient, but there are still groups actively trying to prevent certain people today from exercising their right to vote. It's our duty to stand up and vote to preserve the honor of those who went before us.

We think one of the most critical ways individuals can influence governmental decision-making is through voting, and we're big fans. This is an important election year. Not only will voters be deciding who will be president for the next four years; half of Oregon's Senate seats and all of the seats in the House are up for election this November. The outcome this fall could have a significant impact on how some critically important criminal justice reform issues are handled.

Your vote is your voice. When we vote, we are actually telling elected officials and lawmakers how we feel about education,

public safety, social security, health care and other important issues. There is power in numbers, and when we vote and get our family members to vote, we can truly make a difference. If you don't vote for what you believe in, others will – and you may not like the outcome. It was through elections that we voted in officials who were champions for civil rights. Voting is our chance to make a difference in our own lives and within the world.

How to register

Oregon is a "vote-by-mail state." And you can register by mail or online, too. Forms are located in most banks and public buildings, in every county election's office and in many state agencies. The website is oregonvotes.org.

Since January 2006, Oregon law requires that people must provide identifying information to register to vote (although our voter ID laws are much less restrictive than those currently undergoing court challenges). A person registering to vote is asked to provide identification only if they are a new registrant in the state. Identification is not required for updates. Individuals must provide a current, valid Oregon Driver's License or ID card. If you have neither of these, the last four digits of yours Social Security number must be provided. If you have none of these, you must affirm this and, when registering by mail, provide a copy of one of the following:

- Valid photo identification
- Paycheck stub
- Utility bill
- Bank statement
- Government document, or
- Proof of eligibility under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act or the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act.

SAFETY and JUSTICE

Partnership for
Denise Welch is the communications and development associate at Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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