Democratic Lawmakers Reintroduce Bill To Lift Voting Restrictions On Felons

Proposal Would Allow Felons To Vote Immediately Upon Release
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Democratic lawmakers are renewing a push to allow felons to vote in Wisconsin immediately after they are released from prison.

Wisconsin Democrats have backed the idea for more than a decade, saying state law that prevents those on probation or parole from voting disproportionately affects African Americans.

A number of reports from nonprofit organizations and the federal government in recent years have outlined Wisconsin’s disproportionately high incarceration rate of African Americans and other individuals from communities of color.

A 2013 study from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found Wisconsin had the highest incarceration rate in the United States for black men.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, one of the bill’s sponsors, said about 65,000 Wisconsin residents are temporarily barred from voting because of a past conviction.

"These same people work, pay taxes, pay rent, own homes ... they are impacted in the same manner and deserve the same voice," Taylor said. "But in Wisconsin, those persons, those residents, are treated like the walking dead."
Jerome Dillard, a formerly incarcerated person and organizer with criminal justice advocacy group **EX-Incarcerated People Organizing**, said current law ostracizes people and keeps them away from the ballot box for too long.

Dillard was barred from voting for five years after he was released from prison.

"During that period, I was able to purchase a home, had a good-paying job, but had no say in who represented the community I moved in or the services that were received in that community," he said.

Taylor said law changes in other states signal a nationwide appetite for loosening voting restrictions on former felons.

Last year, Florida, New York and Colorado moved to loosen restrictions.

"I think the mood across the nation is different," Taylor said.

**According to the National Council of State Legislatures**, 14 states and the District of Columbia restore voting rights to felons immediately upon release.

Rep. David Crowely, D-Milwaukee, acknowledged the bill likely faces an uphill climb in Wisconsin’s GOP-controlled Legislature, but said Democrats need to continue bringing it up.

"Just because we haven’t passed something doesn’t mean we should stop pushing what we believe in as Democrats," he said.

Crowley and Taylor, along with another sponsor, Rep. Jodi Emerson, D-Eau Claire, also rolled out a bill that would change how prisoners are counted for the purposes of drawing legislative maps in Wisconsin.

Current law dictates prisoners are counted as residents of the community where they are incarcerated. The lawmakers argue that artificially inflates some communities.

Under their proposal, inmates would be counted as part of the communities where they resided before incarceration.

"It will help empower communities of color, ensure equal representation, despite the huge disparities we have in our criminal justice system," Crowley said of the plan.

The bills are still being circulated for co-sponsorship among lawmakers.

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