Restoration of Voting Rights “Unlock the Vote WI”
The right to vote is fundamental to our nation’s democracy and should be guaranteed to every citizen. Preventing ex-felons from voting contributes to the racial divide polarizing our country. More than two million African-Americans (almost 8 percent of black adults) are prevented from voting because of felony convictions, compared to just under 2 percent of non-African-American citizens. Punishment needs to fit the offense, and lengthy disenfranchisement is simply out of proportion for all but the most serious crimes. In 2016, the average length of stay for parole in Wisconsin was estimated at 38 months, or over 3 years. This is 1.7 times greater than the average across all states (22 months), ranking Wisconsin third nationally in terms of expected length of time people spend under parole supervision.

Felony Disenfranchisement
6.1 million Americans cannot vote because of a felony. Nearly 77% of these citizens are out of prison. Additionally, half are not in prison, on parole, or on probation. Felony disenfranchisement affects one of every 13 African Americans and one in every 56 non-black voters.

Wisconsin Felony Disenfranchisement
• Wisconsin bars people who are in prison, on probation, on parole, and/or on extended supervision from voting.
• As of 2016, there were 64,900 people under either probation or parole supervision in the state, just shy of the population of Oshkosh, WI.
• One out of every 9 African Americans are disenfranchised in comparison to one out of every 50 Wisconsin voters.

Policy Reforms
• Between 1997 and 2010, over 23 states have implemented measures to expand voter eligibility, extending the right to vote to over 800,000 people. Florida is one of the most recent.

Argument for Restoring Voting Rights for Felons
• The Florida Parole Commission reports that “the overall three-year recidivism rate for all released inmates” was 33.1%, while the recidivism rate for released prisoners who were given their civil rights back was 11%.
• The Berkeley Law Journal concluded that “states which permanently disenfranchise ex-felons experience significantly higher repeat offense rates than states that do not.”

Advocacy Efforts
• Connecticut’s advocates tailored their arguments to the constituencies (the public and lawmakers) they were trying to persuade.
• Maryland’s advocates took advantage of a governmental study on felony disenfranchisement. They recruited a diverse advocacy coalition and developed arguments to ease legislators’ fears.
• Louisiana’s advocates used an appellate court ruling on a felony disenfranchisement law as a focusing event. They built a coalition of public figures (Saints players), nonprofits, and Republican and Democratic politicians, and they proposed a moderate, first-step policy.
Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Wisconsin

- In 2009, the Brennan Center worked with the Wisconsin ACLU, the Wisconsin League of Women Voters, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Equality Wisconsin, Institute for One Wisconsin, the American Probation and Parole Association, Disability Rights Wisconsin, State Rep. Tamara Grigsby, and Senator Lena Taylor to propose the Wisconsin Democracy Restoration Act to restore voting rights to people on probation and parole. It passed out of committee but failed in the legislature.
- 2019 - Senator Lena Taylor is working with WISDOM/EXPO, the ACLU of WI, Project Return, Wisconsin Voices and Just Leadership USA to once again propose the Wisconsin Democracy Restoration Act to restore voting rights to people on probation and parole. The Unlock the Vote Campaign seeks to reengage 64,000 disenfranchised voters throughout WI.

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Democratic Lawmakers Reintroduce Bill To Lift Voting Restrictions On Felons

Proposal Would Allow Felons To Vote Immediately Upon Release. By Laurel White
Published: Wednesday, July 24, 2019, 3:35pm https://www.wpr.org/democratic-lawmakers-reintroduce-bill-lift-voting-restrictions-felons

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.