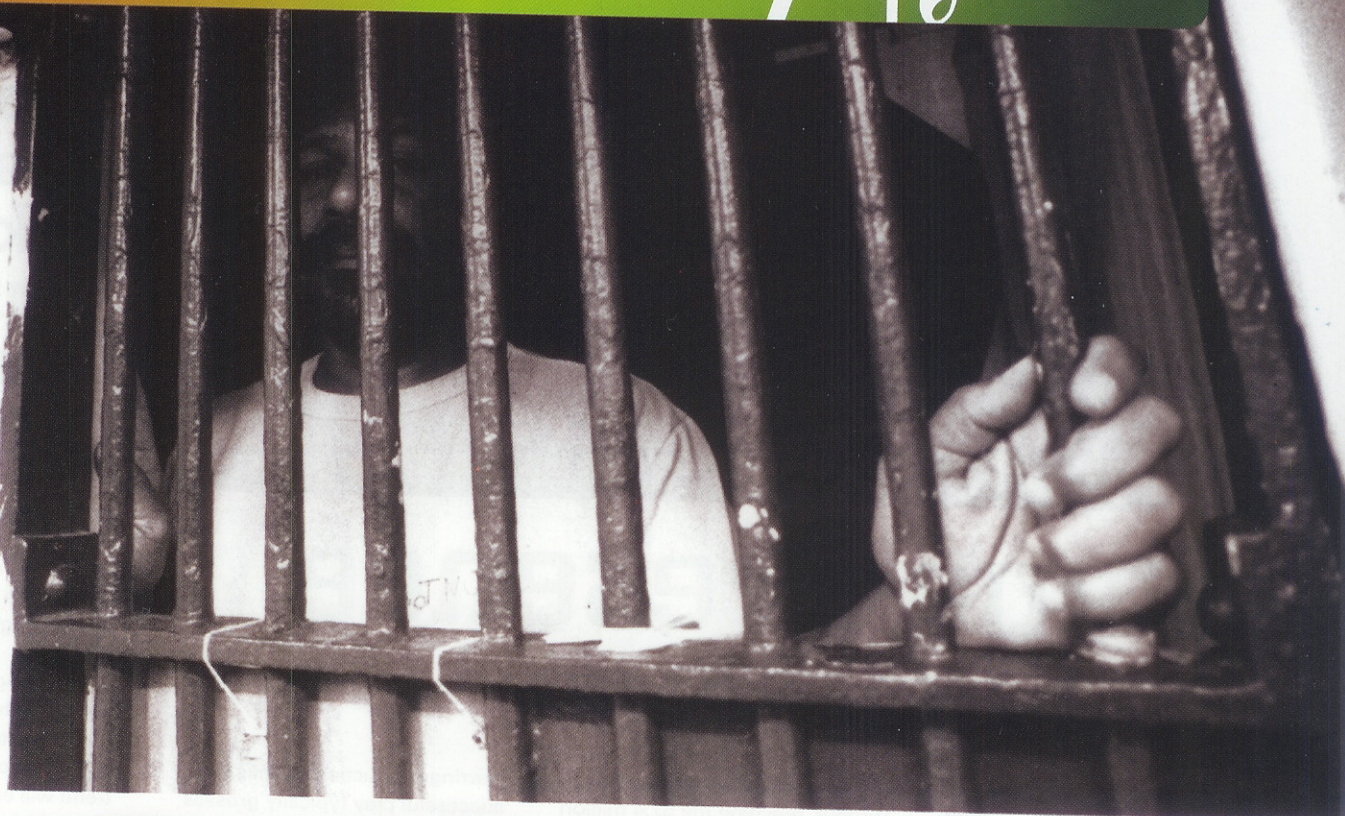


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The Final Count

An incarcerated writer poses the issue of prisoner voter rights to his fellow inmates

While celebrities and politicians have spent months rallying youngsters to vote, a significant sector of the population remains overlooked. Nearly two million currently incarcerated men and women have been stripped of their civil liberties. Most states automatically take voting rights away from convicted felons. This often carries over after they've served their time and are released on parole or probation. Even famous rappers with felony charges like Eminem, Trick Daddy, and Tony Yayo are not immune. "I never voted before, but I was going to this year," says Big Mike, a former inmate, who recently violated his probation. "I was trying to get my rights restored but they're saying I need an order from the governor since I'm an ex-felon. Man, I don't know no governor. So I said fuck it."

The numerous roadblocks set forth by state bureaucracies make it hard for many ex-cons to be active in the democratic process. The biggest part of the problem is misinformation. One in five ex-felons don't realize that they

"I was trying to get my rights restored but they're saying I need an order from the governor. Man, I don't know him."

—Big Mike
Former inmate

can re-register to vote in some states. In fact, in Maine and Vermont prisoners are actually allowed to vote while incarcerated. Only Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi and Virginia permanently take away a convict's voting power. While the rules and limitations vary from state to state, most former felons can have their rights restored by filling out an

application and going before a clemency board. But by withholding these facts, the government has silenced nearly 3.4 million people from having a say in any of the national and local elections. "They got us all out here in West Bumfuck, propping up the economy, but when it comes time to vote, we ain't got no rights," says G-Money, who's serving a life sentence in federal prison. "That's some straight bullshit, yo."

Since inmates count for census reports that determine state funding, it's only fair that they be allowed to vote for their elected officials. Rather than continuing to disenfranchise a powerful voting block, Congress should restore prisoner's rights and let them vote in absentia like US citizens do when they're abroad. Because in today's crucial political climate, every ballot counts. "They need to form the ex-con league or something," says Tone, who's currently serving time in West Virginia. "'Cause if we organized we could make a huge difference."

—Seth M. Ferranti

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