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I got the right?' CT law lets incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated vote but few know

People with felony convictions in Connecticut have their voting rights restored after they are released from confinement. (AP file photo)

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At 62 years old, Santos Torres has never voted in a single election.

After spending more than a decade in prison, Torres thought it was out of the question — until this week, when he learned that people with felony convictions in Connecticut have their voting rights restored after they are released from confinement.

It’s a law that has been on the books for years, but advocates say that too often, this is new information for people like Torres who have experienced incarceration — if they ever learn it at all.

James Jeter wants to change that.

As the co-founder and director of Full Citizen’s Coalition, Jeter is working to advance legislation to end disenfranchisement in Connecticut’s criminal justice system and close the information gaps that keep residents from exercising their right to vote after returning home from prison.

For thousands of individuals on parole in Connecticut, the right to vote is still relatively new — 2024 marks the first time that this demographic will cast ballots in a presidential election.

For years, residents with felony convictions who remained under state supervision through parole could not vote, until 2021 when Connecticut passed legislation expanding voter eligibility.

Beth Hines, the executive director of Community Partners in Action, said everyone enrolled in CPA’s community reentry services are eligible to vote, but, due to misinformation and the patchwork of felony disenfranchisement laws across the country, Hines said “many don’t even know” they have that right. She said Jeter and the Full Citizen’s Coalition help folks understand that Connecticut’s election laws “were changed for you to have a voice.”

After a voter registration workshop at CPA’s Reentry Welcome Center in Hartford on Tuesday, Torres and roughly two dozen formerly incarcerated men and women responded to Jeter’s pitch with a mix of intrigue, skepticism and raised hands.

“I could vote for the president?” one man asked. He sounded astonished.

“I got the right? … Even being on parole?” others queried.

“I’ve never voted in my life,” Torres said.

“You’re going to vote this year,” Hines chimed. “Everybody in this room can vote, and we’re going to.”

Undoing disengagement

For Jeter, registering voters is the easy part — engaging them is another story.

His goal is to push beyond two-party politics and foster the kind of civic-minded attitudes that can transform communities. Speaking before the formerly incarcerated men and women at the workshop, Jeter told the group bluntly that “our communities have checked out.”

“Disenfranchisement has been the gateway to disengagement,” Jeter said. “Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport have very healthy voter roles, they don’t have healthy engagement.”

According to data from the Office of the Secretary of State, in 2023 Hartford had 62,569 eligible voters, representing about 67% of the city’s adult population. However, that same year, only 8,595 residents — just 13.74% of Hartford voters — cast their ballot in the mayoral election. In a city of more than 121,000, Mayor Arunan Arulampalam won with just over 4,702 votes.

To Jeter, it’s also no surprise that Hartford also has one of the highest incarceration rates in the state. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, in 2020 Hartford recorded 1,065 incarcerated residents per 100,000 people, an average that is more than three times the statewide rate of 326 per 100,000.

From Jeter’s perspective, systemic racism, mass incarceration and disenfranchisement are all pieces to a puzzle that drive apathetic electorates and dysfunctional democracies with less-than-democratic representation.

In 2022, the Sentencing Project estimated that 4.4 million Americans were denied voting rights due to a felony conviction, including 6,892 people serving time in Connecticut prisons.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, up to 8% of state residents have a felony conviction on their record. The ACLU said that "because of systemic racism" the rate is even higher for Black men in Connecticut, with rates ranging from 25% to 31%.

Jeter said that if "Mass incarceration has done one thing for our communities, It's given us over-representation."

"We're actually one of the biggest voting blocks in the state, but we are not unified and we have no agenda," Jeter said. "If we can build a community vote, then we give ourselves the building blocks of community to push our community ahead."

Jeter said that when individuals lose the right to vote after a conviction, the impact can linger for generations if they never reclaim eligibility.

"If the head of the house is locked out of a system, that's not something that's talked about in a home, it's not a process you grow up seeing," Jeter explained. "If daddy comes home with a conviction and mommy comes home with a conviction, they ain't never voting again. That was the norm for 40-plus years. And so the conversations around (politics) left the home. And the children don't vote, and their children don't vote, and everybody's saying (the system) don't work, but no one's ever tried it."

Jeter said that while "the presidential election may dominate the media … the most important elections in your life are your city elections." However, Jeter said too many people who have been incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system are not voting.

Once upon a time, Jeter said that he too belonged to the politically disillusioned crowd he now works to convert.

"Growing up, you couldn't convince me this was a thing," he said.

Jeter was just 17 years old when he was incarcerated. Pleading guilty to murder, Jeter was sentenced to 30 years in prison, but after 19 and a half years behind bars, Jeter was released in 2016. He was 37.

When Jeter came home, he said he wanted to “be a part of the change” in his community. He started paying taxes, immersed himself in volunteer work and became more involved with public policy, but at the time, Jeter said he still had 15 years on parole — 15 years that he could not vote.

After co-leading Connecticut’s campaign to abolish felony parole disenfranchisement, Jeter said casting his first vote in the 2021 Hartford Board of Education election felt like the “rewards of a hard-fought battle.”

Today, Jeter has his eyes set on a new front: eliminating felony disenfranchisement.

Voting while incarcerated

Maine, Vermont and Washington D.C. are the only entities in the U.S. that do not strip voting rights from individuals who are incarcerated for felony convictions.

During the 2023 Connecticut session, 20 lawmakers signed on to proposals that would have allowed “individuals, while incarcerated, to become electors and vote.”

The two bills made it to a public hearing, where they received a mix of strong support from advocates like Jeter, and vehement opposition from others. Ultimately they fizzled out without advancing to a committee vote.

In written testimony, Connecticut Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas said the proposals posed “serious logistical challenges.”

While Thomas said “It is crucial we ensure the right to vote is accessible,” she urged lawmakers to first “address the many practical challenges currently eligible incarcerated people face when attempting to cast a ballot.”

In Connecticut, individuals living in jails and prisons can vote if they are in pretrial custody or serving time for a misdemeanor offense — a demographic that represents up to 40% of the state’s prison population, according to the Connecticut Sentencing Commission — but experts say this rarely happens.

In a 2021 report, researchers from the Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School and the Civil Justice Clinic at Quinnipiac University School of Law found that "Thousands of eligible voters in Connecticut's jails and prison system could not exercise their right to vote in 2020 because they had no way to get and return ballots in time for Election Day."

In the leadup to the election, the team identified 3,400 eligible voters in Connecticut Department of Correction facilities. After sending voter information to these individuals and assisting 134 people with registering through the mail, the researchers said "more than 200 people in total returned ballots," however, they later learned "that others also wanted to vote but could not" due to delays in receiving and sending forms, ballots, identification and other materials through the prison mail system.

According to the report, one individual said they received their ballot "the day after election day."

Even after release, Hines said many barriers remain.

Hines explained that many people leave prison without the identification and documentation needed to prove citizenship and residency on voter registration forms. At times, Hines said, "It can take upwards of weeks to months to help them get the ID that they need."

Other obstacles are more abstract. Hines said that people exiting the criminal justice system often struggle with mental and physical health problems, food insecurity, unstable employment and homelessness.

"Thinking about voting is not necessarily at the top of their list when they don't have a place to go that night," Hines said.

But for individuals who do decide to vote, Hines said the act is so much more than a democratic exercise — it offers hope, empowerment and confidence for a segment of the population that often feels as though "no one is listening to them."

A duty, a privilege and a voice

According to testimony from the Connecticut Sentencing Commission, studies suggest that voting and other forms of civic participation are "linked with lower recidivism rates and higher measures of well-being, including employment, education, and both mental and physical health."

"This is part of a transition back into their community," Hines said. "This is their civic duty …They have a right to make a decision as to who they want to lead the country, the state (and) the city."

After registering to vote for the first time, Torres said the prospect of casting a ballot this November "feels wonderful."

"Now, I feel like I'm something," Torres said.

Before, Crystal Allderige avoided politics. Now, she said that could change.

Allderige explained that she never registered to vote because she saw the whole political system as "dirty" and "a setup."

Growing up in a "really bad neighborhood," Allderige said it never sat right with her when she saw urban communities impacted by decisions from suburban voters.

She said she would often joke with friends about what a better job they would do if one of them became mayor.

This week, Allderige registered to vote, but she said she is not 100% certain she will participate in the presidential election.

Regardless, Allderige said the possibility is moving.

"It feels like I have a voice," Allderige said. "We have a voice."