

# The Campaign to Restore the Voting Rights of People Convicted of a Felony and Sentenced to Probation in Connecticut

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In May 2001, a Democratic-led Connecticut General Assembly passed a bill restoring the voting rights of convicted felons on probation. The measure, signed into law by then governor John G. Rowland, a Republican, made Connecticut one of the first states to successfully and significantly alter its voter eligibility law in the aftermath of the controversial 2000 presidential election. This was the culmination of a 7-year campaign started when Hartford freshman legislator Kenneth P. Green introduced a bill designed to eliminate Connecticut's restriction on voting rights of persons convicted of felonies. This investigation tells how Green and the Connecticut Voting Rights Restoration Coalition—a racially and ethnically diverse coalition of more than 40 grassroots organizations and social justice and faith-based groups and agencies working in the criminal justice system and 3 legislatively sponsored commissions for women, Latinos, and African Americans—worked together to secure passage of this landmark piece of legislation.

**Keywords:** *disenfranchisement; voting; restoration; Connecticut; ex-felon*

Across the United States, during the past decade, diverse coalitions of convicted felons, election reformers, civil rights activists, and their legislative allies have successfully conducted campaigns to reform their states' felon disenfranchisement laws (Kalogeras, 2003). Among these states, Connecticut stands out for having successfully and significantly altered its voting eligibility law. The passage of Substitute House Bill 5042, *An Act Concerning Restoring Voting Rights of Convicted Felons Who Are on Probation*, was the culmination of a 7-year battle that began when a freshman state representative from Hartford, Kenneth P. Green, introduced legislation to eliminate Connecticut's most severe restriction on voting eligibility. Green's

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**Author's Note:** A version of this article was produced as a monograph, *The Right to Vote: The Campaign to Restore the Voting Rights of People Convicted of a Felony and Sentenced to Probation in Connecticut*. I am indebted to Joyce Hamilton, executive director of DemocracyWorks, for permission to reproduce portions of that monograph in this article. I would also like to thank Margaret Cibes and Frederick Jenoure for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

bill restoring the voting rights of convicted felons on probation was passed in May 2001 by the Democratic-led General Assembly and signed into law by then governor John G. Rowland, a Republican, becoming *Public Act 01-11*.

Prior to passage of Substitute House Bill 5042, Connecticut's felon disenfranchisement law was among the most restrictive in the nation, preventing more than 50,000 citizens convicted of a felony from voting while incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. However, as a result of *Public Act 01-11*, approximately 36,000 felons on probation became eligible to vote.

How was this victory achieved? This article tells the story of how Green; a racially and ethnically diverse coalition of more than 40 grassroots organizations and social justice and faith-based groups and agencies working in the criminal justice system; the three legislatively sponsored commissions for women, Latinos, and African Americans; and a group of progressive state legislators worked together to secure passage of this landmark piece of legislation.

## Losing the Right to Vote

The ability to exercise the franchise is perhaps the most fundamental right of citizenship in a democracy. It is the one right, according to political theorists Piven and Cloward (2002), that "makes all other political rights significant" (p. 2). Ironically, although voting is regarded as fundamental to democratic citizenship, in the United States, suffrage has never been universal. Until passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, this democratic nation had never come close to universal participation in the political process.

There has never been complete agreement about who should be given the right to vote. At the Constitutional Convention during the summer of 1787, the framers vigorously debated who should be enfranchised. Unable to settle the questions, the framers compromised, giving each state government the power to determine who would be eligible to vote. During the early years of the Republic, most states restricted the franchise to wealthy White men who owned property (Keyssar, 2000). During the more than 200 years since the founding of the Republic, the right to vote has been gradually expanded to include almost every mentally competent citizen 18 years of age or older, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, gender, or creed, with one major exception: Most states restrict the voting rights of convicted felons (Uggen & Manza, 2002).

Nationally, approximately 4.7 million U.S. citizens age 18 and older do not have the right to vote because they have been convicted of felonies. In 48 states and the District of Columbia, convicted felons do not have the right to vote while incarcerated (The Sentencing Project, 2005). Roughly 1.7 million of those disenfranchised due to felony convictions are on probation or parole (Ewald, 2003). Thirty-six states disenfranchise felons while they are on parole, and 31 of these states do not allow felony probationers to vote (The Sentencing Project, 2005).

Why have so many citizens lost their right to vote? Beginning in the early 1980s, in response to the problem of drug abuse and an upsurge in violent crimes associated with the sale and distribution of drugs, many states, along with the federal government, declared a “war on drugs,” adopting mandatory sentencing policies that included increased sentences for individuals convicted of drug offenses (The Sentencing Project, 2001). Because most states strip convicted felons of the right to vote, the exploding prison population led to concomitant increases in the disenfranchised population.

The war on drugs resulted in dramatically increasing rates of incarceration during the 1990s. According to the Department of Justice, 1,148,702 prisoners were held in federal or state prisons or in local jails in 1990. By June 30, 2001, that number had almost doubled to 1,931,859 prisoners. A similar explosion in the prison population occurred in Connecticut. Between 1988 and 1999, the state’s prison population more than doubled from 7,376 to 17,305 (Connecticut Department of Corrections, 2003). The State Office of Legislative Research reported that by the end of 1999, more than 50,000 citizens convicted of felonies had lost their right to vote (Janicki, 2000).

What is more, a growing body of research shows that people of color were disproportionately affected by the nation’s efforts to eradicate the drug problem (Mauer, 1999; Miller, 1996; Tonry, 1995; Wacquant, 2001; Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 1996). Nationally, by 2001, roughly 12% of Black men and nearly 4% of Latino men in their 20s and early 30s were incarcerated, compared to only about 2% of White men (Beck & Karberg, 2001). In Connecticut, of the 13,030 incarcerated because of a felony conviction, 6,235 (48%) were Black, and 3,458 (27%) were Latino. Of the 35,734 convicted felons on probation, 12,779 (36%) were Black, and 8,197 (23%) were Latino. And of the 1,558 convicted felons on parole, 715 were Black (46%), and 462 were Latino (30%) (Janicki, 2000).

It should come as no surprise, then, that because Blacks and Latinos together were a majority of convicted felons, they were disproportionately affected by Connecticut’s felon disenfranchisement law. According to data from the State Office of Legislative Research, more than 20,000 Black men—about 20% of the state’s adult Black male population—were barred from voting because they were either incarcerated or on parole or probation. Among Latinos, more than 8,000 Latino men could not vote.<sup>1</sup>

## Keeping a Campaign Promise

### Kenneth P. Green Runs for Office

How did Connecticut’s felony probationers regain their right to vote? The story began in 1994, when Kenneth P. Green campaigned for one of Hartford’s General Assembly seats on the controversial platform of restoring the voting rights of convicted felons. “This was not a popular idea,” said Green.

This was not something that people wanted to campaign on. I understood that . . . we were in a period when individuals wanted to get tough on crime. Here I was talking about restoring people's [felons'] rights. This was not a popular issue. I really took it on by myself. (personal interview, June 1, 2004)

The reason for making this issue the centerpiece of his first campaign for office, according to Green, was a widely cited report by The Sentencing Project in the early 1990s, which showed that a disproportionate number of young Black and Latino men were under criminal justice supervision on any given day—in prison or jail, on probation or parole. He thought that a similar pattern was unfolding in Connecticut. “I believed if the trend toward disenfranchising those individuals who had felony convictions continued, we would see a sizable number of the African American community and the Latino community not able to vote. . . . I saw this as a dangerous trend” (personal interview, June 1, 2004).

Furthermore, Green felt very strongly that as long as convicted citizens had all of the other responsibilities of citizenship, depriving them of their right to vote was fundamentally unfair. “I really saw this as individuals who were paying taxes without representation. They were paying taxes through the state income tax, federal taxes, and other kinds of taxes. Yet they were not allowed to vote” (personal interview, June 1, 2004).

Finally, Green saw how confusion about the state's disenfranchisement law unnecessarily prevented many people from exercising their right to vote. Even though Connecticut did not have a ban for life, while registering voters, Green often met people who had previous convictions and had completed their sentences but mistakenly believed they were permanently barred from voting because of their felony convictions. And although state law did not prevent them from registering, he frequently met individuals who mistakenly believed they had lost their right to vote because they had been convicted of misdemeanors. Surprisingly, some people even thought they could no longer vote because they had once been arrested.<sup>2</sup>

## Obstacles and Opportunities

Beginning in 1995, during his first year in the General Assembly, Green kept his campaign promise, introducing a bill designed to restore the voting rights of individuals convicted of a felony. Unsurprisingly, he faced many obstacles, including little support from his party's leadership. Indeed, during the next 4 years, the measure went nowhere, dying in the Government Administration and Elections (GAE) Committee without even a public hearing.

By the end of his 4th year, Green had become very frustrated but remained surprisingly upbeat. “I was becoming quite frustrated with the process, the lack of understanding, and the noncaring attitude people had about this issue. This wasn't something that I could excite people about. However,” he added,

over the two terms, I realized that I had to talk to individual legislators, had to try to educate them on what the issue was. So by the time my third term came . . . I had a little more support, in the sense that people understood what the issues were. (personal interview, June 1, 2004)

In 1999, Green saw his window of opportunity. A campaign finance reform bill with strong support among White lawmakers and the state's mainly White prodemocracy groups was moving through the House. The measure would have allowed taxpayers to designate \$5 from their tax returns for an election fund that would be made available to candidates for governor, secretary of the state, and other statewide constitutional offices.

The campaign finance reform bill had made it through five committees. Supporters of the measure believed they had a major victory within their grasp. Instead, the reformers "got a parliamentary lesson in how to kill a bill" (Daly, 1999). Campaign finance reform died after a voice vote in favor of an amendment Green attached to the bill.

Why did this happen? After years of being blocked by House leadership, in an effort designed to give him an opportunity to speak on the floor of the chamber about his measure, Green attached to the public financing bill an amendment that would restore the voting rights of convicted felons. His strategy backfired; it did not take long for the opponents of campaign finance reform to use his amendment to kill the public financing measure.

Most Republicans in the House, who opposed the campaign finance reform bill, enthusiastically supported Green's amendment in an unrecorded voice vote even though they did not agree with its substance. Rather than see the reform measure defeated in a subsequent House vote or later in the Senate, the sponsors of the bill opted to table it. The outcome left many in the state's prodemocracy reform community aghast.

Speaking shortly after the measure was killed, State Representative Andrew Fleischmann, a West Hartford Democrat and a chief sponsor of the campaign finance reform bill, captured aptly the sense of disappointment felt by many of the reformers. "It's extremely unfortunate. A parliamentary trick has subverted the will of the chamber and the preferences of the people of Connecticut" (Daly, 1999).

## **The Connecticut Voting Rights Restoration Coalition (CVRRC)**

### **DemocracyWorks**

Shortly after the defeat of campaign finance reform, Miles Rapoport, former Connecticut secretary of state and executive director of a new prodemocracy organization called DemocracyWorks, met with Rudy Arnold, chair of DemocracyWorks'

board of directors, for a long discussion about what went wrong. Arnold, an African American, and both a former member of the Hartford City Council and a former deputy mayor of Hartford, had initiated the meeting because he was deeply troubled by the fact that there had not been better coordination between Green and the largely White prodemocracy reform community. Arnold suggested to Rapoport that they meet with Green and offer to help him secure passage of his voting rights bill.

Arnold met privately with Green, who was quite skeptical. "He did not take my offer to him seriously when we first talked," said Arnold.

Frankly, he said that he had a lot of reservations about predominantly White democracy reform groups because he noticed that they did not focus on minority group issues. He said that they were focused on campaign finance reform, an issue at the time, which he did not think would have much of an impact on communities of color. (personal interview, July 12, 2004)

Nonetheless, Arnold tried to assure Green that the offer was legitimate. Eventually, he won Green's confidence.

A short time later, DemocracyWorks organized a meeting attended by Green, two Democratic colleagues from the House—Representative Fleischmann and House Majority Leader David Pudlin—and a diverse group of civil rights organizations, democracy reform advocates, church groups, and service providers working in the criminal justice system.

## The Coalition Grows

This organizationally diverse and multiracial/multiethnic group of people held its first meeting on November 16, 1999, at DemocracyWorks' office. All attendees introduced themselves, the organizations they represented, if any, and their reasons for being there. Rapoport started by discussing why DemocracyWorks had convened the group. Green followed with an overview of his efforts during the previous 5 years to secure passage of a voting rights restoration measure. After the presentations, everyone agreed that the issue had merit and that a coalition should be formed to help advance Green's bill. They then compiled a list of organizations not at the meeting that they felt should be at the table. Individuals took assignments to reach out to the groups on the list. The CVRRC was born.

The CVRRC would eventually swell to more than 40 organizations, including traditional democracy reform groups such as Common Cause and the Connecticut Citizen Action Group; organizations with a commitment to civil rights, such as the NAACP and the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union; faith-based groups, such as Capital Region Council of Churches and the Greater Hartford Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance; social service agencies that work with ex-offenders such as Community Partners in Action and the Connecticut Association of Non-Profits; and the three legislatively sponsored commissions for women, Latinos, and African Americans.

## The 2000 Legislative Session: Inside Strategy

At the beginning of the 2000 legislative session, Green reintroduced his voting rights restoration bill. It would take the CVRRC two legislative sessions to build enough support in the General Assembly to pass the measure and get the governor's signature.

During the session, a group of roughly 10 to 15 people met every other week. The people who attended these meetings were neither strangers to each other nor strangers to the legislative process. "The core group consisted of people who ordinarily spent a lot of time at the LOB [legislative office building]," said DemocracyWorks Office Manager Minaren Bozeman (personal interview, June 17, 2004).

The coalition normally met in the late afternoon for about an hour and a half. A typical meeting would start with introductions, followed by an update on the legislative work: members reported back to the group about the legislators they had contacted and whether the legislators supported the voting rights measure. Individual legislators were ranked from 1 to 5, with 1 being a *strong supporter* and 5 being a *strong opponent*. The group discussed media work (meeting with editorial boards or writing op-ed pieces) or strategies for increasing legislator and public awareness of the issue. A meeting usually ended with follow-up assignments with groups on the potential membership list and with legislators, with planning for the public hearing on the bill, with media contacts, and so on.

Organizations unable to attend the meetings were kept informed. Minutes from each meeting, notices about public hearings at the legislative office building, and other information were distributed via e-mail or snail mail by DemocracyWorks Office Manager Minaren Bozeman.

Because the CVRRC had a number of experienced lobbyists, the centerpiece of the coalition's efforts was an inside strategy. The lobbyists built support for the measure by providing information to legislators and testifying on behalf of the bill.<sup>3</sup>

For several strategic reasons, Green introduced the measure in the House Judiciary Committee rather than in the GAE Committee, as had been done in previous years. Most important, whereas the chair of the GAE Committee was hostile to the bill, the chair of the Judiciary Committee, Representative Michael Lawlor, supported the measure. Second, Green was a member of the Judiciary Committee and was able to argue forcefully for the bill. Third, Miles Rapoport had secured the support of Representative Robert Farr, a key Republican leader on the Judiciary Committee. Finally, the coalition believed a measure coming out of the more powerful Judiciary Committee would have stronger momentum.

The Judiciary Committee made a significant modification to the bill. A number of legislators opposed reenfranchising parolees, worrying about the political ramifications of restoring the voting rights of individuals generally regarded as some of the state's most serious offenders. They preferred to limit the law to individuals sentenced to probation. The coalition accepted the change, in large part, because with

far more people on probation (about 36,000) than on parole (roughly 1,600), they felt that the impact of the measure would still be quite substantial. The measure was approved 23 to 17.

The next stop for the measure was the GAE Committee. At first glance, the committee's approval seemed certain: It was stacked with progressive legislators. Moreover, Rapoport was able to get the support of Representative Ron San Angelo, at the time the ranking Republican on the GAE Committee. "Once the ranking Republican on the committee said, 'Yes, I am for it,' it became difficult for other Republicans to go on the attack," said Rapoport (personal interview, April 23, 2004). On the other hand, unlike in the Judiciary Committee, the House chair of the GAE Committee did not support the bill.

Before introducing the bill, the coalition partners did a head count to make sure they had enough votes to pass the measure. When the tally showed that they did, they asked the chair to permit a vote, assuring him that no one expected him to expend any of his own personal political capital on the measure. The bill was approved 16 to 6 with strong bipartisan support.

Even though the measure moved successfully through the Judiciary and GAE Committees, along the way, the coalition partners had to develop a number of persuasive arguments to win support for the bill and to counter the claims being made by the measure's opponents.

Supporters of felon disenfranchisement made several seemingly persuasive arguments that needed to be rebutted. First, they claimed that convicted felons should lose their voting rights because it is a proper response to individuals who have violated the social contract. Social contract theory is the belief that people consent to be governed in exchange for the protection of their individual rights (Dahl, 1998). By consenting to be governed, they also agree to abide by the decisions and rules of the society. Citizens who commit a crime, opponents argued, violate the contract and so should lose their right to participate in the political process that sets the rules for society.

Second, they argued that stripping citizens convicted of felonies of their political rights protects the political system in two crucial ways. Felon disenfranchisement shields society from voter fraud, preventing the demeaning of the political process. Disenfranchisement laws also preserve the "purity of the ballot box" by excluding individuals whose criminal behavior demonstrates that they lack virtue.

Third, they insisted that deprivation of the right to vote is a legitimate punishment: It is simply another penalty that the state chooses to impose in addition to incarceration, and so, those convicted of a felony should not be allowed to vote until they have fully paid their debt. "In my mind, one of the most significant parts of a conviction is the loss of the right to vote," said State Representative John Wayne Fox. "These individuals do get the right to vote back after their probation is over . . . and that's the way it should be" (Hladky, 2001).

The CVRRC countered that stripping felons of their voting rights is neither mandatory nor necessary. Indeed, very little is gained from depriving citizens of their right to vote, particularly felons sentenced to probation. First, depriving them of their rights does not prevent crime. Second, individuals convicted of a felony and sentenced to probation pay local, state, and federal taxes like every other citizen; are affected by the actions of government like every other citizen; and so should have the right to participate in political decision making like every other citizen. Disenfranchisement is the same as taxation without representation.

CVRRC members also argued that the state's disenfranchisement law lacked proportionality. According to the statute, the basis for depriving citizens of their political rights was conviction of any type of felony. As a result, "civic death" could be imposed regardless of the severity of the crime and even if the offender never went to prison. But as the coalition demonstrated, most convicted felons sentenced to probation were not hardened criminals with serious convictions, and most were never incarcerated.

Opponents of disenfranchisement also claimed that depriving citizens of their political rights contradicts the goal of rehabilitation and frustrates efforts to successfully reintegrate ex-offenders back into the community. "One of the purposes of probation is that people are supposed to demonstrate that they are in the process of rehabilitating themselves by being good citizens," said Senator Martin M. Looney. "It would seem to me that participating in voting is an indication of good citizenship" (Hladky, 2001).

Finally, the point was made that because the loss of one's voting rights could be triggered by crimes that had nothing to do with the election process, the argument that restricting the voting rights of convicted felons prevents voter fraud and protects the purity of the ballot box makes no sense. Moreover, the crime of voter fraud was rare. And there is simply no proof that individuals sentenced to probation are any more likely to violate election laws than anyone else.

## **From Committees to the House Floor**

The Voting Rights Restoration bill made it to the floor of the House. The head count was in the high 60s, but 76 votes were needed to secure the passage of the measure. To have momentum going into the Senate, the coalition wanted more than 80 votes. How would they do it? The answer was now deceased New Haven State Representative John Martinez.

Martinez, in only his third term, had risen to become deputy majority leader. Representative Fleischmann remembers telling Martinez that the coalition wanted more than 80 votes but believed it had hit a wall. Martinez asked for a copy of the vote count sheet and told Fleischmann to give him an hour. "There were friends of his in the leadership he pulled over to our side, moderate Democrats he pulled over

to our side, and moderate Republicans he pulled over,” said Fleischmann. “A little over an hour later, the count was in the low 80s” (personal interview, June 7, 2004).

House Bill 5701, *An Act Restoring Voting Rights of Convicted Felons Who Are on Probation*, passed by a 90 to 59 vote with strong bipartisan support. Even though the CVRRC succeeded in getting the voting rights restoration measure passed in the House, they decided not to move the bill forward. The coalition did not send the bill to the Senate in large part because they had the support of only 16 Senators, but 19 were needed to secure passage of the measure. Moreover, it was unclear if the Republican governor, John Rowland, would sign it into law if it did pass the Senate.

### **The 2001 Legislative Session—Inside-Outside Strategy**

Shortly after the 2000 legislative session ended, the coalition reconvened to develop new strategies for securing passage of the voting rights restoration measure during the 2001 session. Two committees were formed. The Voting Rights Education and Outreach Committee priorities would be fourfold: (a) develop educational materials that inform convicted felons of their voting rights; (b) work with key governmental agencies—particularly the Department of Correction (DOC), the Board of Parole, and the Court Support Services Division (CSSD)—to improve their administrative processes and outreach efforts; (c) coordinate voter education and registration drives with the Office of the Secretary of the State; and (d) conduct voting rights restoration and voter education workshops and trainings with agencies and organizations that work with felony probationers and ex-offenders who are eligible to vote.

As part of the public education and outreach campaign, the coalition produced a brochure that explained to convicted felons their voting rights and the process they needed to follow to restore those rights. The coalition had distributed 24,000 brochures in English and 10,000 brochures in Spanish to community organizations, alternative incarceration centers, halfway houses, probation offices, city and town registrars of voters, and all state legislators and the legislative candidates. The coalition had the DOC’s Correctional Enterprises print the brochures.

At the same time, on behalf of the CVRRC, DemocracyWorks organized and conducted voter registration and education workshops attended by more than 770 Connecticut residents in locations across the state. The coalition put up 33 billboards in English and Spanish in five major cities (Waterbury, Hartford, New Britain, Bridgeport, and New Haven) with a very simple message: “A Felony Doesn’t Bar You from Voting Forever.”

The Legislative Committee worked inside the legislature to build support for the restoration bill in the Senate and worked outside the legislature to get the support of (or at least an agreement not to oppose) key people and agencies, including the state’s city and town registrars, the State Elections Enforcement Commission, CSSD, DOC, and Board of Parole.

Just before the start of the 2001 legislative session, the coalition experienced a bit of a jolt when Miles Rapoport stepped down, leaving DemocracyWorks to become president of a New York–based, but nationally recognized, prodemocracy organization called D-mos. Carolyn Gabel, a longtime leader and activist in Connecticut’s feminist and lesbian and gay communities, was named the acting executive director. She had been the associate director of DemocracyWorks since its inception in 1999 and had been an active member of the CVRRC.

At about the same time, Americo Santiago, a former three-term state representative from Bridgeport and a former assistant secretary of the state, joined DemocracyWorks as a consultant in 2000 to implement the CVRRC public education and outreach campaign. He would be crucial to the coalition’s success during the next several months. Because of his experience as a lawmaker, he knew his way around the legislature. Also, he understood the voting rights issue quite well; during his tenure at the Office of the Secretary of the State, he had led its voter registration efforts.

The coalition’s efforts received a boost when DOC and CSSD said that they would not oppose a measure restoring the voting rights of felony probationers. Generally speaking, this move was not a surprise—the climate on criminal justice issues was changing in the state. Lawmakers were rethinking “tough on crime” policies. Simply put, the DOC and CSSD viewed the voting rights restoration bill as another tool to help reacclimate individuals reentering communities after being incarcerated (Rapoport, 2001). A great deal of the credit, however, must go to CVRRC cochair Maureen K. Price and the agency she directs, Community Partners in Action. Because of Community Partners in Action’s ties with the DOC and CSSD, Price was able to facilitate contacts with key people at each agency and help get them to buy into the idea that the restoration of voting rights is an important part of the rehabilitation process.

The 2000 presidential election controversy also helped to change the climate on criminal justice issues in the state. By now, the story is quite familiar: Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, under the guise of an antifraud campaign, contracted with a private company to purge its voter file of any deceased persons, duplicate registrants, individuals declared mentally incompetent, and convicted felons who had not legally restored their voting rights. Blacks were disproportionately purged from voter rolls compared to Latinos and Whites. Moreover, errors during the purging process resulted in the removal of thousands of legally registered Black voters (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2001).

The CVRRC, working alongside its allies in the legislature, was able to rebuild support in the House for the voting rights measure. Significantly, the success of the public education and outreach campaign bolstered the group’s credibility in the eyes of a number of lawmakers. The hard work paid off. The voting rights bill easily passed the Judiciary (26 to 13) and GAE (16 to 3) Committees. The measure was approved with strong support by the House—80 to 63.

The coalition turned its attention to the Senate. They were optimistic; the Democrats' edge over Republicans had grown from the previous year—it was now 21 to 15. After meeting with members of the CVRRC, Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin Sullivan endorsed the measure. In addition, Senator Eric Coleman, from Hartford, the new cochair of the Judiciary Committee, was an ardent supporter of the measure, as was fellow committee member and second ranking Democrat Senator Martin Looney.

Seven years after it was first proposed by State Representative Kenneth P. Green, Connecticut became the 22nd state to allow persons convicted of a felony to vote while they are serving on probation. Substitute House Bill 5042, *An Act Restoring Voting Rights of Convicted Felons Who Are on Probation*, passed the Senate on Wednesday, April 25, 2001, by a vote of 22 to 14—three Senate Republicans voted for the measure along with a majority of Democrats.

The governor, after being put on the spot by Representative John Martinez during the Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus annual fundraiser, which was held shortly after the bill had passed the Senate, agreed to sign the measure into law. On May 4, 2001, Republican Governor John G. Rowland signed Substitute House Bill 5042 into law, making it *Public Act 01-11*.

## Conclusion

Since the signing into law of *Public Act 01-11*, the CVRRC has worked diligently to ensure that the law is effectively implemented. The public education and outreach campaign has been expanded to spread the message about the voting rights restoration law to the general public, people who had a felony conviction, individuals convicted of a felony and sentenced to probation, agencies that deal with ex-offenders, and anyone else who can help convicted citizens regain their voting rights.

To spread the word, DemocracyWorks produced and distributed approximately 30,000 brochures in English and 20,000 in Spanish to all 350 Connecticut town and city registrar offices, coalition partners, alternative incarceration centers, substance abuse programs, public defenders' offices, youth service bureaus, corrections facilities, all state legislators and legislative candidates, the DOC, the CSSD, and the Board of Parole. Also, 33 voting rights educational billboards were displayed in English and Spanish in five major urban areas (Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, and Waterbury) with the simple message, "Now People on Probation Can Vote: Get Involved."

DemocracyWorks, in conjunction with the Connecticut statewide chapter of the NAACP, the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, One Connecticut, and the Office of the Secretary of the State, also conducted regional voting rights restoration and education workshops in Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, Bridgeport, Willimantic, and New London, which were attended by more than 220 people. The presentations were recorded by CTN, the Connecticut public affairs station, and

televised during the 2002 elections. In addition to the regional workshops, the coalition has conducted voting rights restoration and voter education workshops at alternative incarceration centers and for community-based organizations, particularly those that work with disenfranchised citizens. A crucial aspect of these workshops is the training of community-based groups to conduct the workshops themselves.

Connecticut took a giant step forward when a Democratic-led legislature passed, and a Republican governor signed into law, a bill restoring the voting rights of individuals convicted of a felony and sentenced to probation. The passage of Substitute House Bill 5042, *An Act Concerning Restoring Voting Rights of Convicted Felons Who Are on Probation*, and its signing into law, making it *Public Act 01-11*, was the culmination of a 7-year struggle begun by State Representative Kenneth P. Green.

The CVRRC proved that there is strength in numbers. Over the course of 2 years, Green, his partners in the CVRRC, and their legislative allies worked together to secure passage of this landmark piece of legislation. To achieve their victory, the coalition developed a number of strategies and arguments that should be adopted by activists, organizers, and legislators in other states who are working to rid their states of its felon disenfranchisement law.

In the end, Connecticut believed—unlike other states that continue to disenfranchise so many of their citizens, most of whom either never went to jail or have completed their sentences, who are mostly young, who are mostly poor, and who are disproportionately people of color—that depriving citizens of their right to vote diminishes democracy, making it less than what it can be.

## Notes

1. A 2003 report by the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund found that 9 of 10 states disenfranchise Latinos at higher rates than the White population (Demeo & Ochoa, 2003). A 2005 report by The Sentencing Project showed that roughly 13% of adult Black men, compared to 4% of non-Black men, are unable to vote. Across the South, an estimated 30% of Black men are ineligible to vote. In six states that bar ex-offenders from voting, roughly 20% of Black men have permanently lost the franchise (The Sentencing Project, 2005).

2. Most states allow individuals convicted of a felony an opportunity to restore their rights at some point after being released from prison, but the restoration processes are so difficult that few people go about pursuing them. Moreover, in states where ex-offenders automatically regain their right to vote once they complete all phases of their sentence (including probation and parole) and pay any conviction-related fines, many fail to register to vote simply because no one tells them they can. The problem is that few states have laws requiring that they be notified when they are eligible to vote (Mauer & Kansal, 2005).

3. The Connecticut Voting Rights Restoration Coalition received funding from the Public Welfare Foundation, Open Society Institute, Ford Foundation, Melville Charitable Trust, and Solidago Foundation.

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