

MY FIRST VOTE
THE BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

ABOUT THE BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law is a non-partisan public policy and law institute that focuses on fundamental issues of democracy and justice. Our work ranges from voting rights to redistricting reform, from access to the courts to presidential power in the fight against terrorism. A singular institution – part think tank, part public interest law firm, part advocacy group – the Brennan Center combines scholarship, legislative and legal advocacy, and communications to win meaningful, measurable change in the public sector.

ABOUT THE BRENNAN CENTER'S RIGHT TO VOTE PROJECT

The Right to Vote Project leads a nationwide campaign to restore voting rights to people with criminal convictions. Brennan Center staff counsels policymakers and advocates, provides legal and constitutional analysis, drafts legislation and regulations, engages in litigation challenging disenfranchising laws, surveys the implementation of existing laws, and promotes the restoration of voting rights through public outreach and education.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Brennan Center extends a very special thank you to Garima Malhotra, who collected these stories and whose energy, commitment and many skills made this project possible, Susan Lehman, whose thoughtful edits and creative talent brought this project to life, Myrna Pérez, whose innovative thinking is reflected throughout these pages, Daniel Souweine, Ross Lenihan and everyone at Video the Vote for producing such great photographs, and all the first time voters whose stories inspired this project.

The Brennan Center would like to thank The Sentencing Project, ACLU Racial Justice Project, ACLU of Iowa, Prison Creative Arts Project, Bronx Defenders, Rhode Island Family Life Center, Florida ACORN, Michigan Unlock the Vote, X-Offenders for Community Empowerment, Louisville Chapter of the NAACP, Bob Kerr from The Providence Journal, The New York City Department of Parks and Recreations, The Darryl Hunt Project, and The Time is Now to Make a Change.

The Brennan Center also thanks the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Democracy Alliance, Educational Foundation of America, Ford Foundation, JEHT Foundation, Open Society Institute, Tides Foundation, and an anonymous donor for the generous support that made this paper possible. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the Brennan Center.

FOREWORD

My First Vote is a compilation of stories from people across the country who voted for the first time in November 2008 after having lost, and then regained, their right to vote following a criminal conviction.

Despite the large voter turnout in November, there remains one significant blanket barrier to the franchise. 5.3 million American citizens are not allowed to vote because of a criminal conviction. As many as 4 million of these people live, work, pay taxes, and raise families in our communities, but because of a conviction in their past are still denied the right to vote.

35 states continue to deny the right to vote to people who are no longer in prison. That is only half the story. Repeated surveys by the Brennan Center and others have found that many elections officials across the country are unclear on the rules in their states for reinstating voting rights, meaning that even when people with convictions are eligible, they *are* often wrongly turned away.

Bringing people into the political process makes them stakeholders in their government, while barring them from the polls disrupts reentry into the community. Voting affirms the returning community member's value, encourages civic participation and helps rebuild ties to fellow citizens.

The stories in *My First Vote* represent a small sample of the Americans who have returned to their communities, and to the polls, as full citizens. They show the real difference that voting makes in people's lives.

Erika Wood, *Director*

Right to Vote Project, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law

LINDA STEELE

New York, New York

I've been battling substance abuse for thirty years and have been in and out of prison all of my life. But I've been out, and clean, for more than four years. My life has completely changed. And on November 4th, with millions of Americans, I had a say about what happens in our country. There were tears in my eyes as I waited to vote. I felt like I was finally a productive member of society. I've never before felt like I could make a difference in terms of what happens around me. But I walked out of the polling place on Election Day feeling like I mattered, that I made a difference. I realized how far I've come. Amazing.

*But I walked out of the polling place on Election Day
feeling like I mattered, that I made a difference.
I realized how far I've come. - Linda Steele*



Photographer: Chad Frank



Photographer: Greg Wilcox

TERRY SALLIS

Newton, Iowa

I am 57 years old and this was the first time I have been allowed to exercise my right to vote. Going into the voting booth I recall reflecting on my past and contextualizing the historical implications of this particular moment in time. I/we have come a long way. When your citizenship and right to vote is taken away it invariably reflects on you, and a lack of respect for yourself and the status quo. However, with a new out-look on life I returned to school at the age of 50, ultimately completing my Masters degree in Social Work at the age of 55. I wanted to be that positive role model to young disenfranchised African-American males. Now I was about to participate in an exercise that in my mind would fully restore my rights as a citizen.

The feeling was humbling and empowering. The sense of hopelessness and questioning of your self-worth, which goes hand in hand with the loss of citizenship, seemed to vanish once I had voted. I hope everyone understands the importance of having your citizenship and voting rights restored. It instills a sense of hope and belief that if you do the right thing, society is forgiving and there will be opportunities to succeed. I will never again take this privilege for granted and I ask all that have been denied the opportunity to participate in the voting process to advocate and fight for your right for full restoration of citizenship, most importantly the right to vote.

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DEIRDRE WILSON

Santa Cruz, California

I never voted in a presidential election before this one. The ballot was a concrete reminder, not just rhetoric, that I have power in a democracy. I held the ballot and felt I was no longer a number or a second-class citizen. I voted by absentee ballot on the Saturday before the election. As I ran my pen back and forth over the small square space for the candidates I chose to vote for, I felt responsible and powerful; responsible as a member of our society and powerful to have a say in the process. I closed the envelope, removed the edges, and I flattened it very gently with a prayer for social and spiritual change in this world. As I ran my hands over the envelope, I truly felt the energy and weight of the small line of choice I made inside. I felt chills.

My vote is equal to everyone else's and it connected me to the rest of the United States — and to my family. My 19-year-old son also voted for the first time this year. Voting isn't entirely about the candidate who wins; it's about the inspiration and hope people feel when they have a voice they can use to bring real change.

THE BALLOT WAS A CONCRETE REMINDER, NOT JUST RHETORIC, THAT I HAVE POWER IN A DEMOCRACY. I HELD THE BALLOT AND FELT I WAS NO LONGER A NUMBER OR A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN. -DEIRDRE WILSON



Photographer: Christian Suarez



Photographer: Richard Goulis

BRUCE REILLY

Providence, Rhode Island

I have been actively involved in the Right to Vote campaign in Rhode Island since I was released from prison. I spent years in the prison law library reading about the history and the legal justification for the right to vote.

The more I read, the more I realized how wrong the current laws are. Voting is essential. Restricting the right to vote isolates and segregates members of the community. In a society of winners and losers, restricting voting rights creates losers.

Voting is a symbol of empowerment. It's particularly important for people who have lost all their powers to have the ability to stand up for themselves. Imagine you lost your leg and are in a wheelchair; would you rather wheel yourself around, or would you want to be wheeled by someone?

People need to be self-sufficient. When we were working to change the rules in Rhode Island, we built our own movement to get our voting rights back. And the experience of going to people's houses and having that conversation encouraged me to get back into society and not to hide in a corner.

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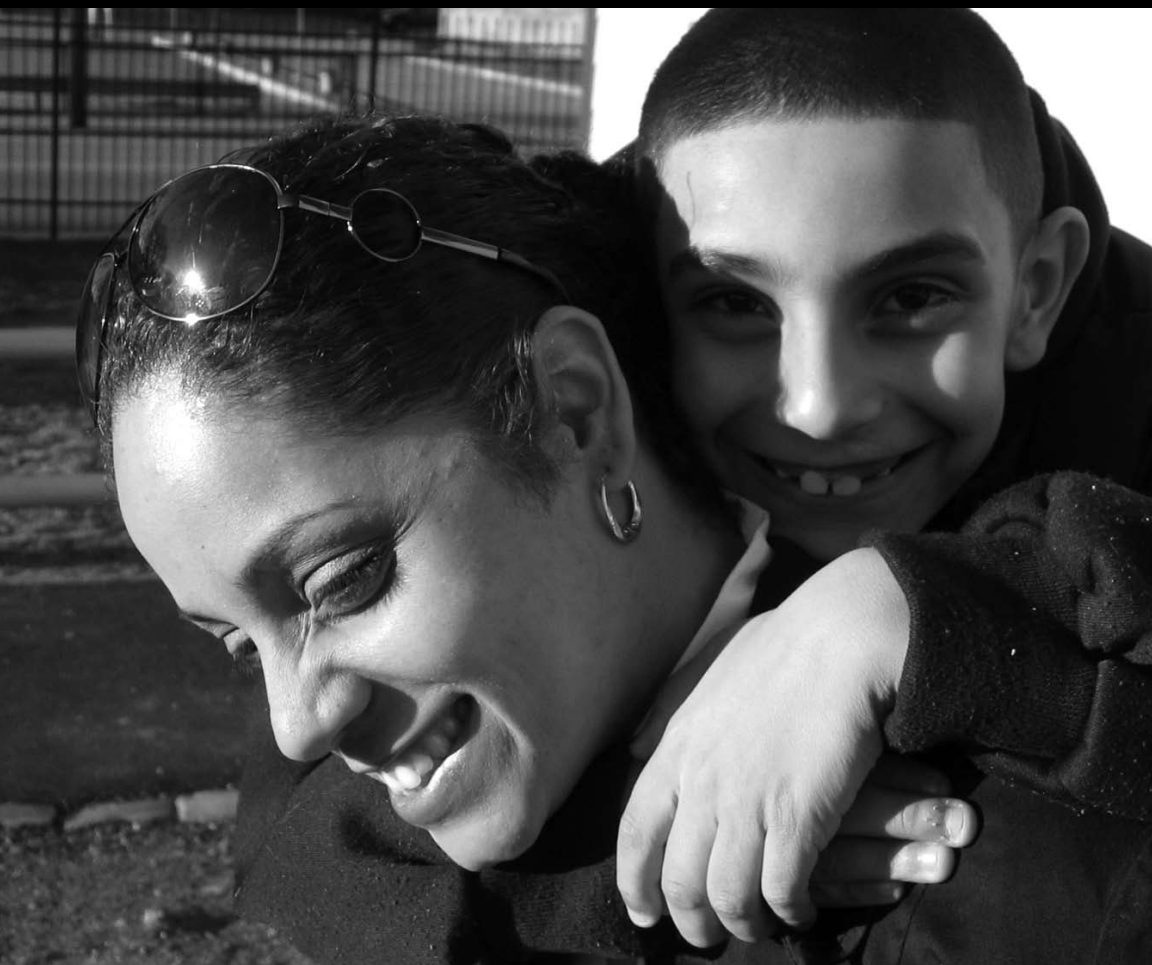
KOREN CARBUCCIA

Pawtucket, Rhode Island

If there is one thing that shouldn't be taken from someone – ever – it is voting. Isn't the point of the criminal justice system to return responsible, law abiding citizens back into their communities? Voting is a way of being a responsible, law abiding citizen. Voting should be something everyone has to do.

I was a volunteer at the Rhode Island Family Life Center when someone suggested working to change existing laws so people like me, on probation and parole, could vote after incarceration. Working with people who were doing the right thing, believing in something real, made me realize even we have the ability to change and be part of something constructive. To be honest, I think just to be excited about something positive was an important start for many of us. The biggest impact of the campaign was my son's excitement when he found out "we won," as he still says. Our real success came in November 2008. I, with my son in hand, walked into the polling place and voted. He had been counting the days to November 4th like it was his birthday!

*Voting is a way of being a responsible, law abiding citizen .
Voting should be something everyone has to do . -Koren Carbuccia*



Photographer: Richard Goulis

MONICA JAHNER

Lansing, Michigan

As a prisoner who has fought hard for the rights of other prisoners, politics is a passion of mine, and I looked forward to being part of history on November 4th. I wanted to wear something appropriate - something that would make a statement, so I got out my red, white and blue stars and stripes jeans and jacket that said "FREEDOM AND UNITED STATES." I had no clue how to vote or what to do. I went with the flow and took my brother along.

As I stood in line waiting to vote, I closed my eyes and thought of the many times in prison I watched the elections on television, felt the excitement, but couldn't vote. I pictured all the prisoners I left behind and said a prayer that they would be able to vote soon.

The country is crying and screaming, and there are tears of utter happiness. As President Obama said, "I have never felt more hopeful." I feel blessed to have been part of this history-making event.

I pictured all the prisoners I left behind and said a prayer that they would be able to vote soon.

- Monica Jahner

WALTER LOMAX

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

I got up on November 4 with a sense of dread. I felt the same way on the morning I was released from prison after serving close to forty years for a crime I did not commit. I welcomed both mornings but had this sense that something would go wrong. As I dressed, all the while making sure that I had all the tolls for the day, camera, pen, pad, and of course reading glasses, I knew that this day would be even better than the day I walked out of that court room.

Before heading to the polling booth, I stopped at my sister Carolyn's home, where I stayed upon my release from prison. I had to pay my respects to the person who stood by me every step of the way. On my way to the polling place, it started to rain. I decided to walk anyways. I wanted to be reminded of what some folk had been through to make this day possible.

When I cast my vote for the next President of the United States of America, it seemed that as a nation, we had finally arrived. I did not think this would happen in my lifetime. I had regained my freedom – and my right to vote – I felt I too had arrived.

TAYNA FOGLE

COVINGTON, KENTUCKY

I couldn't sleep the night before because I was so anxious for 6:00 A.M. to get here. My heart started beating fast, my knees starting knocking. I truly thought somebody was going to tap me on my shoulder and tell me my name wasn't on the list.

I accompanied my 26-year-old son, Michael, to the polling place. It was his first time voting too. Michael had seen the despair in my eyes all the years I couldn't vote and he decided early on to not participate in the voting process until he could experience it with me.



Photographer: Sharon Galloway

KIMBERLY HAVEN

Baltimore, Maryland

Today I voted. Okay, so did hundreds of thousands of others. But what made my vote different is that I am a former felon who just got my right to vote back in 2007. I worked very hard to create and lead a coalition in Maryland that reformed our felony disenfranchisement policies. Our efforts led to the restoration of voting rights to well over 50,000 citizens and changed forever the political landscape in our State. I was proud to stand behind our Governor when he signed the legislation into law and I was given the pen with which it was enacted.

Today I exercised this new right. Not only was it important that I voted, but it was also my job on this historic day to travel the state to make sure that there were no other glitches, no acts of voter intimidation or suppression, and that the citizens in the impacted communities I had worked so hard to empower, were going to the polls and casting their votes.

Working to get my right to vote back has been the singular most significant piece of legislation I have worked on. I believe that today I voted not just for the candidate of my choice, but for a new day where every voice will be heard and every vote will be counted.

Working to get my right to vote back has been the singular most significant piece of legislation I have worked on. - Kimberly Haven

MARC RAMIREZ

New York, New York

I looked forward to voting partly because it was progress in my return to citizenship, and partly because this election was so important and exciting. I wanted to be a part of it.

Voting is important. Many people believe that in the scheme of a national election, their vote is not important. Recent elections have shown otherwise.

My older son is 18 years old and was also able to vote last November. We talked about voting, what it meant, the candidates, and whether or not he was going to vote. I think knowing that I was also voting made him feel like he was on the right track.

"My older son is 18 years old and was able to vote last November. I think knowing that I was also voting made him feel like he was on the right track" - Marc Ramirez



Photographer: Yechiam Gal



Photographer: Cheryl Welch

LEROY CLARK

Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

I dropped out of school, joined the army and went to war. I went back to school when I left the army but got into a lot of messes. I got caught up in drugs, dropped out and became a street person. It all caught up with me and I ended up in prison. I was angry at the world. I had no desire to vote. I felt like if no one was going to help me, why should I do anything for them?

As I got older, I realized I needed to be a part of the solution, not the problem. I saw a flyer on how to get your rights restored and decided to fight to get my right to vote back. When you can't do anything, you create a person who doesn't have a character anymore. But once you vote, you change that. I have a voice again.

When you can't do anything, you create a person who doesn't have a character anymore. But once you vote, you change that. I have a voice again. - Leroy Clark

MAURICE PINKSTON

Brooklyn, New York

I haven't voted in ten years. Every time I applied, I was told I wasn't eligible – even when I got off parole. I assumed I wasn't allowed to vote. Finally, I just gave up. It was sad, because my voting rights were important to me.

When I started working with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, they encouraged us to get back into our children's lives, be productive members of society, and to vote. With their help, I was able to register. I was overjoyed when I got my voter registration card. I was a real citizen! November 4th felt like my birthday.

KAREEM HENRY

Louisville, Kentucky

Since I was 18, I haven't been on the right path. I have been locked up a few times, and as a result, was never allowed to vote. While I was in prison, I started to realize how closed-minded I had been. I started to pay attention to the housing market, the stock market, sports, and politics. Soon, everything opened up. I was reading things about the U.S. and the world. I even took up tennis as a hobby. I am proud that I was able to take the necessary steps to open my mind—to get out of that shadow that had been darkening my life. When I got out of prison this time, I was looking for something different. Maybe the chance for a new start. I was nervous when I went to vote on November 4th. (I was afraid I would mess it up!) But I left the polling place feeling like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

BRENNAN CENTER PUBLICATIONS

Restoring the Right to Vote

By Erika Wood

Voter Registration Modernization

By Wendy R. Weiser, Michael Waldman and Renée Paradis

Democracy & Justice | Collected Writings, 2008

*The Brennan Center for Justice with contributions from Eric Lane,
Bob Herbert and Hon. Janet Napolitano*

De Facto Disenfranchisement

Erika Wood and Rachel Bloom

Voter Purges

By Myrna Pérez

Eligible for Justice: Guidelines for Appointing Defense Counsel

The Access to Justice Program

Better Ballots

Lawrence Norden, David Kimball, Whitney Quesenbery, and Margaret Chen

A Citizen's Guide to Redistricting

By Justin Levitt with Bethany Foster

A Return to Common Sense

By Michael Waldman (Sourcebooks)

Fair Courts: Setting Recusal Standards

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By Frederick A.O. Schwarz, Jr. and Aziz Huq (New Press)

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