



MULTIFAITH EMI

JULY 2024

Freedom Summer Conversations

The Freedom Summer Conversations toolkit series was designed to maintain the momentum from the 2024 “UnConference” held in Dallas, whether you attended or not. It will help you engage your family, friends, local activists and faith community around issues resulting from the carceral state in our country.

In this UNLOCK THE VOTE edition, you'll...

- Learn about the common misperceptions many returning citizens have about their voting rights
- Discover how to access information about post-carceral voting rights and how to restore them, which can vary by state
- Identify strategies for getting-out-the-vote among returning citizens

UNLOCK THE
VOTE

FAITH FRAMING

In his inaugural address to the United States Senate, the Rev. Senator Raphael Warnock boldly declared, “The vote is a kind of prayer for the kind of world we desire for ourselves and our children. And our prayers are stronger when we pray together.”

Following the historic march in Selma, AL, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stressed that the entire campaign had been centered around the right to vote. In his speech, “Our God is Marching On!” he said...

Let us march on ballot boxes, march on ballot boxes until race-baiters disappear from the political arena.

Let us march on ballot boxes until the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs will be transformed into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.

Let us march on ballot boxes until the Wallaces of our nation tremble away in silence.

Let us march on ballot boxes until we send to our city councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress, men who will not fear to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.

Let us march on ballot boxes until brotherhood becomes more than a meaningless word in an opening prayer, but the order of the day on every legislative agenda.

Let us march on ballot boxes until all over Alabama God’s children will be able to walk the earth in decency and honor.

There is nothing wrong with marching in this sense. The Bible tells us that the mighty men of Joshua merely walked about the walled city of Jericho and the barriers to freedom came tumbling down.

Reflection Questions

- Why do you believe faith-based work during the Civil Rights era put such a large emphasis on voting?
- What does your faith say about second chances? Who deserves to have a voice through voting?
- How might the work of expanding the vote during this election cycle be “heart and faith work” (i.e., work that honors your faith tradition)?

PREPARATION

For Facilitators & Circle Leaders

During this house meeting, we'll discuss strategies to combat voter disenfranchisement and suppression. Together, we will develop a comprehensive action plan to Unlock the Vote and make a significant impact on the upcoming November election. Your organizing efforts can drive radical change!

UNLOCK THE
VOTE

House meetings have always been a basic foundation of organizing in America – from people gathering outside of their workplace to unionize, to community members meeting in homes and churches during the Civil Rights movement. House meetings are a proven and effective way to create a larger movement. And we need a movement today!

There is power in mobilizing your community to vote, and many of the elected representatives and officials on the ballot have the capacity to contribute to systemic change in the criminal justice system. We need to choose the right people – not just at the top of the ticket, but also for county commissioners and city council members who often control jail policy, judges who determine sentences, the mayor who appoints the police chief, and the district attorney who decides who is going to be prosecuted. Most Americans do not realize the great impact these elected officials have on the criminal legal system. District attorneys and their deputies have immense discretion over the way justice is dispensed. In the words of *Voting Access for All*, “Local elected officials, whether city council members, county commissioners, or township board members have tremendous impact on the front door of mass incarceration by setting policing policies, as well as the back door of reentry by passing policies that add or remove barriers to returning citizens.”

What would our democracy look like if all our citizens could vote, from the formerly incarcerated and those awaiting trial to those without transportation to the polls or ability to take time off work? Imagine the impact we could make on our criminal legal system if citizens had the power to influence the selection of local prosecutors and district attorneys. Some of “The 7 Deadly Sins of American Democracy” are voter suppression, voter purging/erasure and felony disenfranchisement. These “sins” are a result of the slow erasure of the gains from the Civil Rights Era and can be healed by committed organizing, like the kind you are doing.

CIRCLE PRE-WORK MATERIALS

Prior to your discussion, watch the following videos:



[Voting Access for All short video: Yes, You Can Vote in Michigan Even with a Felony on your Record](#)



[The Power of Prosecutors](#)



[Florida's Disenfranchised: Voices of 1.7 Million Not Allowed to Vote](#)

And read the following articles:

[Faith Compels Us to Act Against Voter Suppression](#)

[How City Prosecutorial Dashboards Impact Incarceration](#)

Glossary

Voter Suppression: Attempts to systematically discourage or restrict access to registration and voting. Examples include strict voter ID laws; polling place closures (which can cause long lines on voting day); cutbacks in early voting; penalties for “get out the vote” campaigns; lack of mail-in ballot options for people with disabilities, the elderly, or those without transportation; or misinformation about who can vote based on who has a criminal record. Voter suppression can also be accomplished by voter intimidation.

Voter Purging/Erasure: Illegitimately or illegally removing voters from voter rolls. Examples include voter eligibility challenges, provisional ballots that did not count (“placebo” ballots) or “spoiled” ballots.

Felony Disenfranchisement: The practice of barring individuals from voting based on prior felony convictions.

HISTORICAL FRAMING

U.S. History of Disenfranchisement

The history of voter suppression in the U.S. is as long as the nation itself. At the time of this country's founding, only white male landowners had the right vote. The Naturalization Act of 1790 permitted only "free, white citizens" to vote. In the book, *The 7 Deadly Sins of American Democracy*, Renaldo M. Pearson writes,

"It took a Civil War to expand voting rights through two constitutional amendments – the 14th Amendment with its citizenship and equal protection clauses, and the 15th Amendment codifying racial equality in voting – and discriminatory and deliberate barriers to voting still persisted. Immigrant-origin communities deemed "non-white" continued to also be systematically denied voting rights and citizenship even after the passage of the 14th and 15th amendments, and even their descendants born in America were denied voting rights... the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Immigration Act specifically banned Asians already in America and their children from naturalization and access to voting rights. Native Americans were not recognized by the U.S.... as citizens until 1924 and even when recognized Native communities were still denied their freedom to vote. (In Arizona, the state constitution kept Native Americans from voting until 1948 when Arizona's Supreme Court struck down the provision. And in Maine, Native Americans were denied the right to vote until the 1930s.)"

Women did not receive the right to vote until the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The U.S. has slowly, through hard-won legal challenges

and well-organized social movements, expanded voting rights. But voting rights have also contracted, after hard-fought gains.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was one of the biggest achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. It prohibited racial voting discrimination by outlawing poll taxes, direct intimidation and literacy tests. It also expanded voter access and reduced voter suppression. But the gains of the Voting Rights Act have slowly,

carefully and intentionally been eroded over time in the legal system. A good book about the history of this erosion is Naomi Zack's *White Privilege and Black Rights*. A significant erosion of the Voting Rights Act occurred in 2013 with the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. This ruling stated that regions with a history of discrimination no longer needed federal oversight before changing their voting practices. Since then, states like Texas have enacted stricter voter ID laws, and states across the South have freely closed polling stations, imposed harsher penalties for "fraudulent" voting and

engaged in various forms of voter suppression without federal oversight. Additionally, there has been an increase in local municipalities purging voter rolls under the guise of preventing fraud.

Disenfranchisement is another way to prevent people from voting. Currently, 2% (1 out of 50 adult citizens) are disenfranchised due to a current or previous felony conviction. Of this number, 3 out of 4 returning citizens have completed their sentences or remain supervised while on probation or parole. One in 19 Black citizens of voting age are



disenfranchised, a rate 3.5 times that of non-Black Americans. **Approximately 100 million Americans, roughly one-third of the U.S. population, have a criminal record. Most states restrict voting rights for individuals convicted of felonies, with some prohibiting felons from voting entirely. This widespread disenfranchisement of returning citizens leads to significant racial disparities among eligible voters.**

Local District Attorneys and judges have enormous power in influencing the criminal legal system, and their races can be deeply influenced by local citizen groups like ours.

In some states, like Texas for example, judges are elected. A district attorney is the chief prosecutor for a local government area, usually a county, who leads a team of prosecutors, also known as deputy district attorneys. Prosecutors determine whether to file charges against defendants and decide the severity of the penalties they will face. Typically, the DA directs his or her team of prosecutors whether to adopt a “tough on crime” stance or one that is focused on a proportional response and alternatives to incarceration.

During the past three decades, criminal justice experts say the aggressive charging and

sentencing policies of DAs have filled America’s jails and prisons. But just as they have driven the mass incarceration crisis, they also can bring it to an end. Judges and DAs often have a lot of discretion in the sentences they demand.

According to an article in *The Arkansas Journal of Social Change and Public Service*, “When discretion is involved, there is the potential for good, leniency and second chances, but there is also a chance for rigid, harsh, unwavering decisions where leniency is deserved. Discretion means that the state has such a large variance in court procedures and sentencing across one state, even across one county. For some, it seems wholly unfair that they could be sentenced to incarceration in one county where if they committed the same exact crime in another county they would receive a fine. For that person, discretion did a massive disservice. When there is discretion and humans at the giving and receiving end of this discretion it can lead to the absence of procedural fairness in the judicial system.”

Reflection Questions

- How does voter suppression and disenfranchisement specifically target BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color), the poor and people with disabilities?
- Compare and contrast today’s voter suppression tactics and disenfranchisement from Jim Crow-era poll taxes, literacy tests and property requirements that were outlawed in the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
- How has the U.S. experienced “backsliding,” through legal and illegal means, from the voting rights gains of the Civil Rights Era? What actions can our movement take to address this regression?
- Do you, your neighbors, friends or family have personal experience with the power of local DAs, prosecutors or judges that you feel comfortable sharing?

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Internal

- Identify the candidates running for DA, prosecutor and judgeship positions in your area, and research their policy platforms.
- Read the [case study](#) from Michigan's Voting Access for All.
- Research and learn who can vote in your state, even if they have interacted with the criminal justice system or have a record. Consider what misinformation might be preventing people from exercising their right to vote.
- Learn about the Unlock the Vote campaign, an initiative of the Multifaith Initiative to End Mass Incarceration aimed at increasing civic participation among justice-impacted citizens. Through community-based organizing, we will highlight pathways to voting for those who are eligible but may lack the necessary information or resources due to a criminal record. This campaign will focus particularly on Georgia, South Carolina and Texas.

TAKING ACTION

Pray with Your Feet

"I prayed for freedom for 20 years, but received no answer. Until I prayed with my legs."

– Frederick Douglass

"I prayed with my feet."

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, returning from the Selma voting rights march, when asked when he had time to pray

"Silence is akin to complicity."

–Talmud Yevamot 87b

This Jewish teaching reminds us that remaining silent in the face of injustice is an active choice – a form of tacit consent. Allowing an injustice to persist unchallenged is, in essence, committing an injustice yourself.

Amplifying

Tell your story on social media, talk to elected officials, etc.

- Organize a forum for DA, prosecutor and judicial candidates to discuss their platforms and address questions related to ending mass incarceration.
- Write and share content about voter disenfranchisement, voter suppression and voting rights for individuals who have interacted with the criminal justice system.
- Combat misinformation about voting eligibility and procedures by creating a group video with accurate information and distributing it through social media channels.

Campaign

Connect with a trusted partner to work on their existing campaign

- Plan or attend a voter registration event
- Plan or attend a voter education campaign
- Plan or attend a voter mobilization and Election Day event
- Connect with local campaigns in your area like [Pure Justice Houston](#), to learn about ongoing efforts and explore how you can get involved.

Case Study

Voting Access for All in Michigan

Voting Access for All in Michigan has successfully countered much of the misinformation surrounding who is eligible to vote. They also have worked closely with returning citizens to restore their voting rights. They have an educational campaign that reassures voters they can vote if: you have a felony record; you are on probation, parole or tether; you are awaiting arraignment, trial or sentencing, regardless of your incarceration status; your housing is unstable; you have a disability or you do not have a Michigan ID.

The organization also hosts Juneteenth celebrations for community-building and rallies at the Michigan Capitol. Their primary areas of focus are:

1. [Community Voting Outreach](#) – The goal is to inform those who have felony convictions and/or are on parole that they have the right to vote. They also educate them about how to exercise that right.
2. [Jail Voting](#) – Their outreach to people held in Michigan jails prior to their trials provides them with education and support to exercise their right to vote. In addition to working directly with jail facilities across the state, they have produced a [report on Voting in Jail in Michigan](#), which they are using to advocate for systemic changes across the state.
3. [Voting in Prison](#) – This is a long-term goal to influence Michigan policy to allow for voting in prison.
4. [End Prison Gerrymandering](#) – Their goal is to help leverage community-wide pressure to end the practice of prison gerrymandering in Michigan.
5. [Encourage Civic Engagement](#) – They encourage everyone to advance criminal legal reform in their communities through a variety of tools.

Watch this short video : [Yes, You can Vote in Michigan Even if Your Housing is Unstable](#)

