By the Way President Obama, We Have to Fix This Too:
Voting is A Right, Not A Privilege
By Dorsey Nunn, San Francisco, CA – Dec. 18, 2012

In the final weeks of the 2012 campaign, I had the privilege of traveling to Pennsylvania with a national delegation of The Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted People’s Movement. One of the goals of this movement is to actively engage formerly incarcerated people in civic life through voter education and voter registration. That’s why when two of our member organizations, the Returning Citizen Voter Movement of Philadelphia and the National Council for Peace and Justice in Pittsburgh, invited us to conduct voter registration in areas hard hit by Voter ID laws, we said yes!

Many of us on the delegation were haunted by the memory of the grand theft of 2000 when Florida’s felony disenfranchisement laws prevented over 600,000 citizens from voting in a presidential race decided by 537 votes. If that wasn’t bad enough, following that robbery, we witnessed our country being led to war. We watched as our children were sacrificed for democratic principles that many of us are unable to access because of conviction histories. We read newspaper accounts of people being allowed to vote in Iraq’s prisons while back in the US, many of us were being denied the right to vote because we had been to prison. We saw elected officials proudly hold their ink-dipped fingers in the air as an act of solidarity with the democratic efforts pursued in Iraq. Meanwhile, these same officials continued to block our efforts to make democracy more accessible to our communities.

During the 2012 election we felt an even greater sense of urgency once we realized that the new voter suppression policies target our children and our elderly, not just us. This time around, it was more difficult for the right to disguise the heist as a safeguard against voter fraud. Why? Because college students and seniors haven’t been as thoroughly demonized as people with conviction histories have. It was harder for the right wing to justify stealing their votes. This didn’t stop them of course.

When examined more closely, the 2012 wave of voter suppression lays bare the unpleasant national truth that there is nothing fair about our politics. The purpose of denying fundamental voting rights to entire categories of people has always been about controlling the results. The increasing restrictions on early voting, the expanding voter ID laws and the bogus concerns for voter fraud serve the same purpose as felony disenfranchisement, to hide and legitimize this control and render the theft invisible.

Well, we’re not having it. Our right to vote doesn’t only belong to us as individuals. It belongs to our ancestors who died for it, to our children, to our families and to our communities. That’s why we refuse to accept the idea that our votes don’t matter and that we don’t matter. We reject the distorted media messages about who we are. We know that off camera, millions of us ARE contributing to our communities despite all the obstacles put in front of us. The sooner more of us can vote, the sooner we can dismantle those obstacles and make even more meaningful contributions.

According to an economist’s estimate in 2008, the severe employment discrimination against people with conviction histories costs the US economy, including our communities, between $57 and $65 billion in reduced goods and services. Due to disproportionate enforcement and sentencing, communities of color are hardest hit by this loss. So while it may be that individuals are denied the right to vote one at a time, the fact is felony disenfranchisement results in the collective punishment of particular classes of people. Guess who?
The 2012 election marks the first time formerly incarcerated people decided to follow our own lead in regards to civic engagement. Why? Because over the course of the last decade we noticed that no one ever came seeking our civic participation in the places that we hung out or frequented. Although our numbers are impressive, the 65 million people with conviction histories in the US face a confusing patchwork of voter registration policies. Consequently our voting power is deemed too difficult to tap.

Young voters are targeted by efforts like Rock the Vote and strategies are employed attaching the value of voting to new citizenship. Many of us are part of those communities too, but as folks with conviction histories and prison time we need our own GOTV efforts. Ironically even our celebrities with conviction histories never focus on engaging us. They use their experience to sell music but I haven’t seen them talk to us about voting. It makes me wonder if political consciousness is more dangerous than crime since it’s not proclaimed as loudly.

That’s why during the 2012 election cycle we decide to organize ourselves. We looked past the billboards threatening to punish us if we made a mistake about our conviction status and registered to vote. Our movement reached out to people in jails, treatment centers, halfway houses and educational and vocational schools. We stood in front of probation offices and court houses and outside the various Alcohol and Narcotics Anonymous meetings encouraging our communities to become involved in the democratic process. We also employed litigation strategies to expand the pool of people with conviction histories who are eligible to vote.

Consider the impact of the Latino vote in this past election; what might happen if Americans with conviction histories, including those who are Latino, were able to exercise the right to vote? We already know, in states like Alabama, where we’ve won back some voting rights, we can have a significant impact on election outcomes.

In the early hours of Nov. 7th, President Obama said: “I want to thank every American who participated in this election. Whether you voted for the very first time or waited in line for a very long time. By the way, we have to fix that.” As I listened, I thought of all the people who have never even been allowed to get ON the voting line yet and said to the TV screen: President Obama, we have to fix that too and we will. 2016 here we come!

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