



**Testimony of James Jeter, co-founder of Connecticut's Full Citizens Coalition,  
representing the National Voting in Prison Coalition (NVPC)**

**Supports HB 1022 Voting Rights for All Act  
Maryland House Judiciary Committee**

Good afternoon to members of the Maryland House Judiciary Committee. I am James Jeter, a member of the National Voting in Prison Coalition and co-founder of Connecticut's Full Citizens Coalition.

The National Voting in Prison Coalition supports the passage of HB 1022 to guarantee the voting rights of all eligible Americans in our elections. Restoring the right to vote is smart policy. It enables people who are incarcerated to feel connected to their communities, especially as they re-enter society, and therefore reduces the likelihood of them taking part in criminal activity and returning to prison. After all, if I'm an active voter then I'm an active voice in my community. But all that is held up if I'm not given the right to vote.

At the founding of this country, nothing was held more sacred than the right to suffrage. However, it was clear to the founding fathers that this inherent right was not a right for all, but a right for a select privileged few. A right so regarded as the quintessential character of citizenship, that it was safe guarded from the general majority. The American founding fathers barred suffrage on the bases of race, color, gender, creed, and economic status, reserving the right to build equity through civil engagement for white male property owners, and war vets. Slowly over the last 200 years, America would prove its founding fathers to be right on the sacredness of Suffrage as the quintessential character of citizenship, and wrong on whom it should be afforded to.

In 1891 Prof. James Bryce published his article *Thoughts on the Negro Problem* in the North American Review. Concerning Suffrage and the enfranchisement of the African diaspora in America Prof Bryce writes:

“How are the anomalies and contradictions of the political position to be overcome? the negroes have got suffrage, which in ***America is the source of all power***....it has been solemnly guaranteed to them by the constitution; and they are not suffered to enjoy it. Such a situation has more than one element of evil in it, it is a standing breach of the

constitution, a standing violation of that respect for law which is the very life-blood of democratic institutions. It is calculated to provoke the resentment and disaffection on the part of more than seven millions of people. It suspends the natural growth and play of political parties in the south, forcing the negroes to stick to one national party, irrespective of the ( often far more important) local issues which State politics present; forcing the southern whites also to hold together as one party upon one issue, instead of dividing and regrouping themselves according to the question which the changing conditions of their country bring from time to time to the front. Thus it perpetuates sectionalism a grave mischief in national politics..”

The denial of suffrage for African Americans, has had crippling effects on all Americans, it has been at the root of all divisive practices, robbing all americans of wrestling with the thoery of democracy, and locking us into antiquated ideologies of the what America should be, an ideology that roots itself often in racist biases that perpetuate the degradation of all minority citizens.

The NVPC submits this testimony today, understanding that felony disenfranchisement, undergirded by a century of black wage thief, redlining, and 50 years of Mass incarceration has upheld the oldest and most prolonged disenfranchisement in America. The effects of Mass Incarceration on black life can best be metered through it’s unwavering ability to civically disenfranchise the men and women who sit inside of state facilities, detached from the political make up and building of their communities. Opposition argues against this wrong in two ways, one is by saying why should those who break laws have the privilege to vote while incarcerated, it is suspended just like any other privilege: you also can not drive while incarcerated. The other argument being that why should they enjoy their rights when they obviously didn’t care for them while free. Both arguments lack an understanding of citizenship as designed by the founding father, and fought for by every marginalized group since. Voting is not a privilege, it is the pivotal right that citizenship hangs on, the right to affect government, and create community equity, the right to ensure that representation is reflective of community and keeps community needs and wants at the forefront of their job. It is to the sculpting of what America can and should be, and the absence of any one from that process robs the entire nation.

What Mass incarceration has set in black and brown communities, yet overwhelmingly in black communities is a complete indifference to the electorate process, for decades men and women came home completely disenfranchised and started families, rejoined families and communities yet the discourse of civics became absent, a constitutional right fought for and won in blood and degradation was stripped from the community through the war on drugs and the mass representation in the carceral system that would ensue, upholding the vicious cycle of denying us a valid response to resolve harm (whether self inflicted or thrust upon us from outside influences and actors), as well as empowering outside entities over the welfare of the community. In other words black communities are shaped in absentia, and left in a paternal stronghold where judgment and biases of others become the molders of our communities yet somehow we still hold the full responsibility for all negative outcomes. It is by design not coincidence that all Federally recognized and designated racial and ethnic concentrated areas

of poverty commonly referred to as R/ECAP neighborhoods, also have extremely low to nil civic engagement. These neighborhoods also make up a majority percentage of our prison system.

To be able to tie the plight of R/ECAP neighborhoods to criminal activity, is to ignore the disenfranchisement prior to felony disenfranchisement that created the neighborhoods. What felony disenfranchisement does is allow convenient amnesia from those who hold to antiquated biases of black and brown people to the practices and policies that have historically shaped and denied black communities from developing. What felony re-enfranchisement does for these communities is it allow for the conversation of democracy and engagement to sit in the home in the most productive way, it allows for men and women in the carceral space to take full advantage of the time they are doing to reintegrate into society with a community mindset and ownership while doing their time rather than trying to figure it out afterwards. It will reduce the recidivism rates, and spark the imagination of the community at large. It is not the solver of all problems, yet it is the cornerstone of all solutions. To not see the benefit re-enfranchisement does for historically locked out communities, is to desire to keep them just that.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. On behalf of the National Voting in Prison Coalition, we recommend the Maryland House Judiciary Committee advance House Bill 1022.