



## VOTING RIGHTS

### PREPARING TO TALK TO/WRITE TO YOUR LEGISLATORS

In thinking through what you want to share with your legislators, try to include these 4 parts:

1. **Why this issue is important for our state.** Pick 2-4 facts or statistics that help explain the issue and why we must take action.
  - Roughly 94,000 New Jersey residents are prohibited from voting because they are serving prison sentences or are on probation or parole
  - New Jersey has the most restrictive voting laws compared to all New England states and New York. This past November we were witness to the largest enfranchisement of US Citizens in the past century, when 1.4 million formerly incarcerated individuals regained their voting rights in Florida. New Jersey can follow..
  - New Jersey's first broad ban on voting by people with criminal convictions was written into the state's 1844 Constitution, which also reinforced a policy, first adopted in 1807, that limited the vote to white men. The 1844 ban denied the right to vote to any person convicted of "blasphemy, treason, murder, piracy, arson, rape, sodomy, or the infamous crime against nature, committed with mankind or with beasts," among other offenses. It lasted until 1970, when it was struck down by a federal judge as "[totally irrational.](#)"but lawmakers responded the next year by broadening the disenfranchisement statute to include anyone serving a sentence or on parole or probation.
  - Today in New Jersey, black adults are 12 times more likely to be incarcerated than white adults — the largest racial disparity of any state in the country. As a result, black people comprise only 15 percent of the state's population but about half of those who have lost their voting rights due to criminal convictions, according to the report.

- Overall, more than 5 percent of New Jersey's black voting age population is ineligible to vote.

2. **Why this issue is important to you as a Reform Jew.** Pick one or two Jewish values and connect them to the issue you are addressing. You can draw from the Jewish sources/Resolutions pages.

“Our tradition teaches us that the process of choosing leaders is not a privilege, but a collective responsibility. The Sage Hillel taught “Al tifros min hatzibur, Do not separate yourself from the community” (Pirke Avot 2:5). Rabbi Yitzhak taught that “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted” (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55a).

This ethic of political participation has guided Jews to enthusiastically participate in the American electoral process and is epitomized by our traditionally strong voter turnout. Jews also have placed a priority on voter education and registration efforts.” -CCAR Resolution on Elections Reform 2001

Our tradition teaches us that we can make amends. Throughout the High Holy Day season we remind ourselves that we have the ability and the obligation to improve ourselves, to repair the harms we may have caused, and to forgive one another for our transgressions. As Jews, we recognize that we all make mistakes, and so our sense of what is just and what is right teaches us that, except in the most extreme circumstances, no one should be punished forever because of a one-time mistake. (Rabbi Greg Weisman) Giving voting rights back to those incarcerated, on parole, or on probation helps with rehabilitation and re-entry.

3. **Why this issue is important to you as an individual.** If possible, share a personal story that demonstrates your connection/passion for the issue.

4. **What you want the legislator to do (“The Ask”).** Ask the legislator to vote for/against/cosponsor a piece of legislation (make sure to include the bill number). It is helpful to know legislator’s past positions/role in this bill, which you can explore in [njleg.gov](http://njleg.gov).

Vote Yes/Cosponsor **S2100/A3456**, expanding voting rights to those with convictions as a civil rights issue.