

Felony Disenfranchisement on Wikipedia

“We know of no other democracy besides the United States in which convicted offenders who have served their sentences are nonetheless disenfranchised for life.”—The Sentencing Project

The United States is unique among democracies in its systematic disenfranchisement of people with felony convictions.¹ Twenty-one countries have no restrictions on voting for felons, even while incarcerated.² Another fourteen have “selective restrictions” for certain felons, but only while in prison.³ Ten more have a complete ban on felon voting, with voting rights restored upon release.⁴ Only Armenia, Belgium and Chile join the US in permanently disenfranchising people with felony convictions.⁵ However, the current trend in the US is toward greater enfranchisement for felons in America.

The Wikipedia page [Felony Disenfranchisement in the United States](#) is dedicated to the topic. This paper first examines the page for its strengths and weaknesses, including those of sources used (i.e. diversity of authors, sources and ideological position), and any “gaps” in sources or content. It identifies many strengths, but even more “opportunities,” in the form of insufficient or missing content, and suggests potential additions or revisions. Finally, edits made to the Wikipedia page to rectify some of these weaknesses are detailed, specifically in the categories of “Reforms” and “Impact.” The sources used are also given mention.

Strengths

Sources

¹ The Sentencing Project, “VI. Disenfranchisement in Other Countries,” *Human Rights Watch*, Accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/vote/usvot98o-04.htm>.

² ProCon.org, “International Comparison of Felon Voting Laws,” *Brittanica ProCon.org*, April 11, 2018, <https://felonvoting.procon.org/international-comparison-of-felon-voting-laws/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The Felony Disenfranchisement in the United States Wikipedia page contains citations from both male and female sources, though it would appear that males are cited more frequently, and both race/ethnicity and LGBTQIA representation are difficult to discern. Much of the source content comes directly from state and federal government institutions and documents. Respected institutions in the field, such as The Sentencing Project,⁶ Brennan Center for Justice,⁷ and the ACLU⁸ are adequately cited, as are reputable US media sources. Ample information and sources in opposition to felony disenfranchisement are available on the page.

Content

The Wikipedia page includes a good general overview of felony disenfranchisement in the US, including the historical (pre-, during- and post-Civil War) and racial components (disproportionate effect on African Americans). Additionally, Black and universal suffrage are linked in the main article. Current data is used in the main article, “Recent Statistics,” “Reforms,” and by-state enfranchisement policy. Information by-state about the number of disenfranchised felons and the processes they must go through to regain voting rights is relatively comprehensive, at least as an overview. Though by no means comprehensive—and often somewhat out-of-date—the content is an accurate snapshot of the felony disenfranchisement topic. Someone wanting to learn about felony disenfranchisement in the United States would come away with more than a basic knowledge of the subject, with ample ideas for additional research.

Weaknesses

Sources

⁶ Chris Uggen, Ryan Larson, Sarah Shannon, and Arleth Pulido-Nava, “Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction,” *The Sentencing Project*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>.

⁷ Brennan Center for Justice, Accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/>.

⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, Accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/>.

Though a diverse range of trusted and reputable sources exists, there is room for improvement in both gender representation (it is not known whether any of the citations represents ethnically or racially diverse, or LGBTQIA authors) and ideological diversity—this page has clearly been compiled by opponents of felony disenfranchisement. There are only two references to proponents of felony disenfranchisement—one in the main article, and another (unsourced) under the “Constitutionality” subheading—so there is room for improvement in terms of representing alternative viewpoints, even if the national and global trends are toward enfranchisement. Both sides of the argument should be represented in order for readers to develop informed opinions.

Content

Information under the “Background” heading only dates to 2008, and the state-by-state breakdown chart, “Estimates of Disenfranchised Individuals with Felony Convictions,” is only current to 2016 data. There is a lot of overlap between subheadings, as can be expected in a crowd-sourced document—different users add information at different times and in different places, sometimes publishing edits under an existing category, and other times, adding new categories. It would be helpful for someone to periodically go through the page and consolidate information into the appropriate headings, adding new sections where appropriate and also organizing the individual contributions by date relevance (“Reforms” only had a few entries, and though they included dates of action, the individual entries were not in dated order—I fixed that).

The racial component of felony disenfranchisement, while addressed in the main article, is insufficiently addressed under the “Racial Disparities” subheading, and the disproportionate effect on the LatinX community is not mentioned in either section. Even with external links, three sentences covering the topic are not enough. “Economic factors,” inasmuch as it addresses the

some of the financial hurdles to felony enfranchisement, is already discussed under the by-state “Classifications” subheading. It should be expanded upon as an individual topic. And “Transgender Disenfranchisement” deserves more than a “See Also” link.

The “Impacts” subheading only had one brief sentence about the potential political impact of felony disenfranchisement on Senatorial and Presidential election outcomes. There are far more potential political impacts of felony disenfranchisement, as well as other areas of impact, from the individual to societal levels and beyond. These include, but are certainly not limited to, social, health, economic and contribution to recidivism. Numerous academic studies exist on the subject, and organizations like The Sentencing Project and Brennan Center for Justice are excellent sources for impact information.

Though the by-state numbers of disenfranchised and the processes for enfranchisement are more or less comprehensive, under “Reforms,” categories by state only include (not in alphabetical order) Florida, Nevada, Iowa, Virginia, Kentucky, and “Other States.” Here, all fifty states, Washington, D.C. and US territories each deserve their own heading, and more detailed and recent information regarding current reform efforts are needed. For the purposes of this project, the state of Tennessee was added.

Other gaps found under the “Reforms” subheading included the lack of a Wikipedia page for Maxine Waters’ 2002 Voting Restoration Act (H.R. 2830)—in order to include an internal Wikilink to a Wikipedia page about H.R. 2830, the page must first exist. And though a Wikipedia page exists for Senator Benjamin Cardin’s Democracy Restoration Act of 2017 (S. 1588), there was no mention on the page of this legislation. This section needs all states, D.C. and US territories represented, with current reform efforts for each.

Making all of the above corrections/additions was beyond the scope of this project. There were numerous lacking categories and content lacking within existing categories. There were also organizational issues (not to mention inconsistent citation coding). Suffice it to say, it seemed important to at least give each point mention. These are all excellent and useful opportunities for future contribution. Next, this paper will turn to the revisions that were made.

Revisions

Reforms

In addition to organizing all entries by date of relevance and adding internal Wikilinks for the ICCPR and Senator Benjamin Cardin, the following content was added under the “Reforms” subheading:

[In a report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2013, a coalition of non-profit civil rights and criminal justice organizations argued that US felony disenfranchisement laws are in violation of Articles 25 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\), ratified by United States in 1992.\[29\]⁹](#)

[In 2017, Senator Benjamin L. Cardin \(D, MD\) introduced S. 1588, the Democracy Restoration Act of 2017 to Congress.\[30\]¹⁰](#)

Under the new state of Tennessee category, internal Wikilinks were added for the Campaign Legal Center, Americans for Prosperity, institutional racism and police brutality. The following content was added:

[The Campaign Legal Center \(CLC\), as part of its national "Restore Your Vote Campaign," is actively engaged in restoring voting rights to disenfranchised felons in the state of Tennessee, and filed a lawsuit \(Falls v. Goins\) on behalf of two citizens of Tennessee against the state.\[42\]¹¹](#)

[As part of discussions in the Tennessee General Assembly in 2019-2020 about a bill aimed at reforming Tennessee's restoration process, a joint policy brief compiled by libertarian political](#)

⁹ The Sentencing Project, “Democracy Imprisoned: The Prevalence and Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States,” September 30, 2013, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/democracy-imprisoned-a-review-of-the-prevalence-and-impact-of-felony-disenfranchisement-laws-in-the-united-states/>.

¹⁰ US Congress, Senate, *Democracy Restoration Act of 2017*, S. 1588, 115th Congress, 1st sess., introduced in Senate July 19, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1588>.

¹¹ Georgia Lyon, “CLC Sues Tennessee for Restricting Citizens' Ability to Vote,” *Campaign Legal Center*, July 21, 2020, <https://campaignlegal.org/update/clc-sues-tennessee-restricting-citizens-ability-vote>.

advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, the Tennessee public policy think tank Think Tennessee, and Nashville-based reintegration organization Project Return, was submitted to the Constitutional Protections & Sentencing Subcommittee, but failed to pass. The brief discusses numerous benefits of voting rights restoration for felons, including saving tax money and reducing recidivism, as well as potential enfranchisement strategies.^[43]¹²

Most recently, on August 20, 2020, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed H.B. 8005 and S.B. 8005, increasing the penalty for camping on unapproved state property from a misdemeanor to a Class E felony, punishable by up to six years in prison and automatic loss of voting rights, as per Tennessee law.^[44]¹³^[45]¹⁴This move was a result of a two-month-long protest against institutional racism and police brutality that involved a round-the-clock encampment on capitol grounds.^[46]¹⁵

Impact

Under the “Impact” subheading, three categories were added: Political, Health and Recidivism, with the one existing entry on the potential political impacts falling under the first category. Here, it should be noted that “Economic” is a necessary category addition in the future, and different levels of impact explored, beginning with impacts on the disenfranchised individual.

Edits are as follows:

Health

A 2013 study found that felony disenfranchisement contributes to adverse health outcomes: lack of ability to influence health policy through the electoral process reduces distribution of resources to that group, and contributes to allostatic load, by way of complicating the reintegration process.^[104]¹⁶

Recidivism

¹² Americans for Prosperity-Tennessee, Think Tennessee, and Project Return, “State of our State: Rights Restoration,” *Think Tennessee*, Accessed November 24, 2020, https://thinktennessee.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/State-of-Our-State-Policy-Brief_-Rights-Restoration_FINAL-updated.pdf.

¹³ Tennessee Congress, House, *AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 8; Title 38; Title 39 and Title 40, relative to criminal law*, HB 8005, 2nd Extraordinary Session, introduced in House August 10, 2020, <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/111/Bill/HB8005.pdf>.

¹⁴ Tennessee Congress, Senate, *AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 8; Title 38; Title 39 and Title 40, relative to criminal law*, SB 8005, 2nd Extraordinary Session, introduced in Senate August 10, 2020, <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/111/Bill/SB8005.pdf>.

¹⁵ Natalie Allison, “Tennessee legislature cracks down on protesters, making it a felony to camp overnight outside Capitol,” *The Tennessean*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2020/08/12/tennessee-passes-law-targeting-protesters-makes-capitol-camping-felony/3354879001/>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Purtle, “Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States: A Health Equity Perspective,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 4 (2013): 632-637, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3673242/>.

A 2012 study argues that felony disenfranchisement "further isolates and segregates ex-felons re-entering into society by denying them the ability to participate in the political process." [105]¹⁷

Sources

The sources used for the Wikipedia page revisions were Human Rights Watch, Britannica ProCon.org, The Sentencing Project, The Brennan Center, ACLU, Congress (House and Senate), Campaign Legal Center, Think Tennessee, Tennessee Congress, The Tennessean, National Institutes of Health and Berkeley La Raza Law Review. These are all highly-trusted institutions, and thus good sources of reliable and accurate citation information for research. Of the sources for which the author(s) were published, six were male and three were female, mirroring the trend in the preexisting citation information on the page. Overall, the most readily-available, relevant and accessible sources happened to be by male authors, perhaps indicating a gender imbalance in this field of research.

Conclusion

This project revealed several strengths, but also some highly salient weaknesses. While the Wikipedia page on felony disenfranchisement in the US contains a lot of useful, accurate and informative information, what is lacking matters—most specifically, more comprehensive, state-specific reform effort information; more information about racial disparities affecting African American and LatinX communities; LGBTQIA disenfranchisement deserves further contribution; and much more information is needed about the myriad impacts of felony disenfranchisement—for the individual, families, community and society. There is also a noticeable lack of oppositional information, a fact that creates a sense of bias or imbalance. Aside from those and some organizational issues, the page does what it sets out to do.

¹⁷ Guy Padraic Hamilton-Smith and Matt Vogel, "The Violence of Voicelessness: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement on Recidivism," Berkeley La Raza Law Journal 22, no. 2 (2012), <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/berklarlj22&div=26&id=&page=>.

The most exciting aspect of Wikipedia is the opportunity for each of us to learn, explore, build on and improve the body of knowledge available to the public. Wikipedia reaches millions of people around the world. And if public opinion translates into mobilization and policy action, we all have the power to contribute to the formation of narratives that can achieve the sorts of policy change that, in many cases (like felony disenfranchisement), are so desperately needed.

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Wikipedia Reflection

1. Comfort with editing Wikipedia?

In terms of the value of the contribution and reliability of the content I added, I was extremely comfortable with editing Wikipedia. I used reputable and trustworthy sources, including groups and individuals with expertise in the field of felony disenfranchisement and government documents. I enjoyed the opportunity to improve the Wikipedia page on a very important issue.

The technical aspects are a little of both—when I first opened the “Learn to Edit” link, I was literally in tears. None of it made any sense. I was certain I was never going to figure out how to write Wikipedia code for citations.

However, after giving up on the official directions, I opened the page under “Edit” and just looked at the citations and references as they appeared on the page with and without the code. I was more or less able to look at other contributions similar to mine, then see how they wrote the code and write mine the same way. That being said, I *immediately* noticed extremely inconsistent code. Some were in different orders, had weird spaces that other code didn’t have, etc. I think Wikipedia should have an “Examples” link where one can view a list of sources by type (journal, newspaper, website, federal/state government documents, online magazines, etc.). Actually seeing how the code should be written for specific examples is more helpful than reading “how-to” instructions without context.

At any rate, after realizing there were inconsistencies, I went to look at the references section to see how my edits actually appeared, and they were not perfect. For example, there were dates of publication I could have added, some dates were in the wrong order (by

default?) and one was completely wrong and did not even link to anything. After a little help from the professor, I was able to go back and revise (an re-revise) my revisions.

2. Was it easy or difficult and why?

By far, the most difficult part of this assignment was writing Wikipedia code. Finding good sources and content on felony disenfranchisement is pretty easy. And really, once you write a few citations, it starts making more sense. However, it is still tricky getting everything to show up in the right place and figuring out different formats for different types of sources. Having other contributors' edits as examples was probably more valuable than anything.

3. How much confidence do you have in your edits?

I am confident in my edits, based on the sources I used and the fact that there are just so many good sources to choose from—felony disenfranchisement is a popular topic for research and policy activism. My only regret is that I was not able to contribute much more.

4. What do you see as your role in creating or updating information in our society?

This project demonstrated how powerful a single contribution can be toward the creation of a national or global narrative, subsequent formation of public opinion and policymaking, and finally, policy feedback. There are so many studies, books, websites, etc., Wikipedia has become a central hub—a one-stop shop—for information. And when many individuals work together to revise and build on content, it serves as a sort of peer-review process, outside an academic setting. Though intimidating at first, this turned out to be a really enjoyable assignment, and I can see myself contributing to Wikipedia in the future!

5. Do you feel that you have a better understanding of Wikipedia and how to use it?

I absolutely have a better understanding of Wikipedia and how to use it. I always have been a hands-on learner—someone who benefits far more from *doing* something than just

reading about it or even seeing it done by someone else. There is a learning curve with Wikipedia (and their directions and how to locate them...good grief), but I came away from this a more knowledgeable person, both about Wikipedia and how it works and felony disenfranchisement in the United States.

6. Have your views on how information is produced changed? If so, how?

Editing Wikipedia myself reminded me about how careful we need to be when researching topics—crowd-sourced information can be easily manipulated or otherwise incorrect or misleading. The beauty of crowd-sourcing is the peer-review aspect, but with so many Wikipedia pages, it would be hard to ensure all content is accurate at all times. If pages contained false or misleading information, it could be a long time before anyone gets around to correcting them, and in the meantime, many people could be influenced by that bad information. But overall, I think that comes with the territory, and Wikipedia is an exciting, dynamic and useful resource!