Free The Vote 2020

Disenfranchised Californians Lead the Campaign to Restore our Voting Rights

Building on decades of voting rights work begun in 2003 as All of Us or None, formerly incarcerated & convicted people campaigned over the past three years to restore voting rights to 50,000 Californians on felony parole, culminating in the passage of Prop 17.

Sometimes the effort is as important as the outcome. Securing the right to vote for 50,000 Californians on parole is a remarkable accomplishment in itself, but it helps to turn to history to fully understand the scope of the effort. Frederick Douglas stated “power concedes nothing without a demand,” and Malcolm X often quoted, “If you don’t stand for something you will fall for anything.” Both of these men were speaking to the effort associated with struggle. We have struggled too. The road to justice for Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and All of Us or None has been long. And we’ve had many allies. Unfortunately, all the comrades and organizations that have walked with us will not be mentioned in this report—not because they were not important but because they are simply too numerous. However, the journey is often as important and rewarding as the destination, and I want to stress how much I appreciate all the people who assisted: from those who took just a few steps with us to those who are still walking beside us on this historical journey.

Our desire to address the disenfranchisement of people with felony convictions was inspired notably by the 2000 Presidential Election, when thousands of people in Florida who wore that scarlet ‘F’—and many who were “mistakenly” ID’d as Felons—were denied the right to vote. That election, as you probably recall, was decided by fewer than six hundred votes, and stolen by a misguided ruling from the United States’ Supreme Court.

Less than three years later, in the spring of 2003, fifty formerly incarcerated people gathered at a house in the Oakland foothills, believing that enough was enough, and determined to start a movement led by and for formerly incarcerated people. We decided, emphatically and unanimously, that the time had come for us to speak in our own voices: we wanted to be heard, and we knew we would have to demand it. This meeting led to the founding of All of Us or None, with our mission from the very beginning to fight for the full restoration of our civil and human rights—with a main focus on employment, housing, education, and voting.
The following year, LSPC wrote to the California Secretary of State to ascertain if people held in county jails on felony charges had the right to vote. We eventually heard back that yes, they did have the right to vote—but we weren’t notified in time for the election that fall.

So we started working to get a handle on what the county jail landscape looked like. In 2004, All of Us or None, in partnership with the ACLU, polled county jails up and down California to better understand the range of voting rights practices, and found they were all over the map. The following year, LSPC, The League of Women Voters, and the ACLU filed a lawsuit against California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley—and won. McPherson vs. Davis clarified what we had believed to be true all along: people in the county jail for felonies, as well as those outside of lockup who were on probation, could vote. The only people who couldn’t were those in prison and those on felony parole. But we needed the Secretary of State to take action, to craft a statewide policy that would make those rights tangible. That, it turned out, would take years. Then-Secretary of State Kevin Shelley had blown us off.

But we kept pushing.

At a 2004 Peace & Justice Summit, SF Public Defender Jeff Adachi works with AOUON members to create more effective Clean Slate record clearance clinics and increasing voting access in county jail.
In June of 2008, we tried to reach out to the next Secretary of State, Debra Bowen. She ignored our request to meet. So we organized an informational picket outside her office. And guess what? Her staff met with us. But still, nothing came of it. We realized we needed to appeal to the court of public opinion: a few months later All of Us None held a National Day of Action for jail and prison voting rights, distributing information to jail visitors, reaching out to the media, and getting the message out through word of mouth.

Meanwhile, we also continued to press for voting rights for people on felony parole by filing a class-action lawsuit to demand those rights. But in 2007 we experienced a setback there, too, when the California Supreme Court ruled against us. We would have to resume that fight at a later time.

By this time, it had become painstakingly apparent to us that access to democracy for people with a felony conviction history was not an urgent issue for our courts. We needed to explore other approaches to secure those rights.

We went big. On February 28, 2011, LSPC and All of Us or None were among the key organizations that convened in Alabama with plenty of allies. All told, more than fifty formerly incarcerated organizers and leaders showed up. This event was hosted by a group called The Ordinary People Society, and the gathering gave birth to a new movement that has continued to grow to this day: the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People’s & Families Movement (FICPFM).

Once again, All of Us or None was pushing the notion that we had to speak in our own voices in order to make meaningful change. Once again, organizers agreed...
that securing the right to vote for formerly incarcerated people would be among our top priorities. We marched across the Pettus Bridge to symbolize that we had important unfinished business, and to wed our effort to our nation’s earlier fights for voting rights. An even larger meeting followed later that year in Los Angeles, on November 2, 2011. It was the first time we formally gathered under the umbrella of the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People’s & Families Movement. We voted on the FICPFM platform, and once again voting rights ranked high on the issues we collectively concluded we had to pursue.

Though years had passed since the victory in McPherson vs. Davis, we still hadn’t succeeded in getting ballots into county jails. Then, in 2011, California enacted “public safety realignment.” The reform was historic: it shifted incarceration and supervision responsibility for many people with lower-level felonies from the state prison system to county sheriffs and probation departments, based on the idea that locals could do a better job. With many people no longer on parole, we believed they, under the McPherson ruling, had the right to vote. In March 2012, All of Us None filed suit against Sec. of State Bowen to challenge the fact that people sentenced to the county jail for low-level felonies after realignment were still being barred from voting. We thought we had it in the bag, but the court denied our case without a hearing. We were beaten, but not broken, and ready for the next fight.

Two years later, LSPC joined in filing yet another lawsuit against
the Secretary of State: Scott et al v. Bowen argued that people who, due to realignment, were now on post-release supervision and mandatory supervision (rather than on parole) could not be denied the right to vote. We prevailed. Bowen’s office appealed. It seemed endless.

But by August 2015 we had a new Secretary of State: Alex Padilla. And to our relief, he withdrew the appeal, effectively affirming the right to vote to 60,000 jailed and formerly incarcerated people on supervision in California. Thus a confusing convolution of rules became simplified: everyone can vote except people with felony convictions serving time in state prison or on parole. We co-sponsored Assembly Bill 2466 to codify the Scott et al v. Bowen decision, and we assisted in its passage. With that, we began planning for our next big fight.

In September 2016, the Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People’s & Family Movement convened for the first-ever national conference, here on our home turf in Oakland, California. Over 400 formerly incarcerated people attended from all over the country. It was a special time for LSPC because the FICPFM steering committee publicly called on funders to steer resources our way. We were no longer acting like crabs in a barrel fighting over scraps—we were now a genuine network of organizations led by formerly incarcerated people. We held the conference at the Hilton Oakland Airport, but so many people attended we had to use the neighboring Holiday Inn for overflow. In addition to the funders who accepted our invitation to attend, we also hosted other dignitaries to demonstrate how much we had grown, and to signal that we were more than capable of organizing large events. We displayed the movement platform—the one we’d arrived at back in 2011 in Los Angeles—and, utilizing phone app surveying representing a new technology to our organizing, asked all our members to select their top priorities. The results confirmed that voting rights still ranked high.

Meanwhile, LSPC continued to grow. In 2018 we purchased our own building, moving from San Francisco to North Oakland, and opened the Freedom and Movement Center. We looked at it as a small down payment on our self-determination, and made a singular point to employ the labor of many formerly-incarcerated contractors and subcontractors to complete the renovations. We also became landlords to several local businesses located in our building, and were able to put the rent we received toward movement-related expenses.

Flush with the pride of new “home” ownership, LSPC and All of Us or None co-sponsored and helped to organize the second FICPFM National Conference in Orlando, Florida in September, 2018. This time, a thousand organizers showed up to share strategies and successes. That was a turning point! While we
assisted in the local campaign for Amendment 4, we started learning new and relevant skills about how to move public policy through the ballot box, about phone banking and the power of text messaging, and the importance of market branding our political campaigns. Voting rights remained very much on our radar.

The following month, as most people watched nationwide election results come in with an eye to which politician had won, many formerly incarcerated people were watching other contests. We wanted to know whether 1.4 million disenfranchised people with felony convictions in Florida had secured the right to vote through the passage of Amendment 4. And they did. We wanted to know if Louisiana’s Amendment 2 would prevail. That one entitled people being tried for crimes to a unanimous jury verdict of twelve people for a conviction to stand, instead of just ten. It did. We wanted to know if we had kicked Jim Crow in the balls twice. And yes we did.

Those were monumental and instructive victories. We were ecstatic and ready to take on the remaining disenfranchisement in California. So on January 17, 2019, we organized a major event at UC Berkeley to host Desmond Meade, of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC), and Norris Henderson, of Louisiana’s Voice of the Experienced (VOTE), so they could share the lessons from their campaigns and connect our state to the larger national movement. These two experienced, formerly incarcerated organizers showed us what could be accomplished through ballot propositions—lessons and skills that would prove incredibly useful to us in our continuing journey.

Getting a measure on the ballot about the voting rights of people on felony parole was a complex, multi-part process, requiring a change to the state Constitution. Our effort began when we co-sponsored Assembly Constitutional Amendment 6 (ACA 6), authored by Assemblymember Kevin McCarty (D-Sac). We immediately faced the enormous hurdle of convincing the California Legislature to agree, by a two-thirds margin in each chamber, to put the issue before the voters. We formed a unique coalition consisting entirely of organizations either led or staffed by formerly incarcerated organizers. We knocked on countless doors asking legislators for their support. We sought out those who were on the fence and, in some cases, used our first-hand experience directly impacted by disenfranchisement to successfully change their minds to support the amendment. We secured resolutions of support from the city councils of Oakland and Richmond, and from the boards of supervisors of Alameda and San Francisco counties. We purchased and developed the web domain www.freethevote2020.org.

With the support of FICFPM, we were able to run a full page ad in the Sacramento Bee. We ran it three times in the Sunday paper—the day with the largest circulation of 168,000. Over the course of the same two weeks, our ad received 369,017 digital impressions. The ad had star power, highlighting the names of a host of influential supporters, among them Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, Eva Patterson, Susan Burton, Dolores Huerta, and, of course, the FICFPM steering committee.

We also highlighted ACA 6 during our annual Quest for
Democracy, our signature lobbying event, in May 2019. And at this year’s Digital Quest for Democracy we featured a breakout room to discuss it with legislators. LSPC staff, fellows, and interns, and AOUON chapter members joined with many allies hosting countless planning meetings, setting up informational tables in many cities, and canvassing the streets to meet our communities where they are. Our efforts succeeded: ACA6 passed the legislature.

ACA6 became Proposition 17 on the ballot. Finally, we got the opportunity we’d been working towards for so many years: the people of the state of California would have a chance to weigh in on a basic right we believe our state government should have embraced and defended decades ago. In more “firsts” for formerly incarcerated-led organizing, we hired a communication strategy group to ramp up our digital presence, run op-eds, and refine our messaging ahead of the November 2020 election. We wanted to center the voices of the formerly incarcerated, so we collected video testimonials from people directly impacted, and we rolled those out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. We supplemented those key voices by including high-profile influencers such as Michelle Alexander, John Legend, Dolores Huerta, and Danny Glover, who, like so many who have done time in lockup, are also people of color.

By Election Day, our staff and stipended AOUON members made 50,000 phone calls in our phone banking efforts, as well as sent out over 300,000 text messages. We distributed over 10,000 “Yes on 17 – Let All People Vote” face masks in front of stores, on buses, on corners, at rallies, in laundromats, at re-entry and drug treatment centers, in barber shops, and at every other imaginable place where our staff could gain entry. This was a statewide effort that reached deep into numerous communities, including Stockton, Bakersfield, San Diego, Riverside, Los Angeles, and East Palo Alto. To ensure that our message was reaching people...
incarcerated in the local county jails, we distributed hundreds of masks to the Offices of the Public Defender in San Francisco and Alameda counties, and to the office of San Mateo County’s Private Defender Program. To make sure that we touched all possible areas, we also distributed masks to non-profits and coalition partners located across the state.

And to guarantee that our engagement didn’t escape the attention of our inside-prison membership, we directly mailed Prop 17 information in English and Spanish, as well as leveraged our newly established 12-page AOUON newspaper to include ads for Prop 17, articles about felony disenfranchisement, and share stories of directly impacted people.

To live up to our commitment to breaking bread with each other instead of wrestling over crumbs, we shared financial resources with other All of Us or None chapters across California to engage in the get-out-the-vote efforts.

Now that the election is over, and 50,000 Californians on felony parole have their voting rights restored, I am anxious to learn the outcome of such a massive effort. Will it be challenged and mitigated by more Jim Crow-style laws, as has happened in Florida? Will it bring us the respect that such a long-fought struggle deserves? Will Black and Brown communities see our votes as their gifts? Now that Prop 17 has passed, will people across the nation be able to connect the dots and realize that formerly incarcerated people have successfully amended three state constitutions in three years? Will they be able to extrapolate that so many caged bodies, if released, could produce fundamental political change in marginalized communities? Will we be viewed as potential assets, instead of liabilities, to our communities? Will we be accepted as the leaders with the experience necessary to lead the movement for the restoration of our own rights? Because next: we’re restoring voting rights to all people in prison.

John Lewis, who was brutally beaten in pursuit of voting rights, taught us more than slogans. He taught us the necessity of sound practices and endurance. No matter the outcome of the election, the ultimate prize could come from the lessons we learned, the hands-on experience we gained, and the willingness to fight back using the law as our tool. We have got to make Black Lives Matter, and we believe we can and will get there.

—Dorsey Nunn

The Free the Vote 2020 coalition was instrumental to the success of the campaign. Thank you to all who worked so hard, but especially:

Young Women’s Freedom Center
PolicyLink
LA Voice
CURYJ
Sister Warriors
A New Way of Life Reentry Program
Starting Over Inc.
Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)
Just Cities
Underground Scholars
Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco (LCCRSF)