

The Faces of Mississippi's Lifetime Voting Ban

Mississippi is one of only four states that impose a lifetime voting ban on all citizens convicted of disenfranchising offenses. The post-civil war scheme, adopted in 1890, was meant to disproportionately and permanently ban African Americans in Mississippi from voting. Through a complicated legislative “suffrage bill” process, the law also gives legislators unbridled discretion to decide whose voting rights to restore, a clear violation of the U.S. Constitution.



Herman Parker

Herman Parker, 44, lost his right to vote when he was convicted of grand larceny in 1993. More than 14 years after completing his sentence, he was able to convince then-state Rep. George Flaggs Jr. to sponsor a suffrage bill that would restore his voting rights.

Although the Mississippi House of Representatives voted in favor of the bill, it failed in the Senate. As a result, Parker is still banned for life from voting.

“I’m a husband and father of two beautiful children, and I’m proud to have worked for the city of Vicksburg’s housing authority for over a decade,” Parker said. “I’m not that 19-year-old boy anymore – I’m a man and deserve a voice in government because of who I am today.”



Dennis Hopkins

Dennis Hopkins, 43, was convicted 20 years ago of grand larceny. He now owns his own business, coaches T-ball, baseball, and softball teams, and founded a championship-winning peewee football team. He and his wife of 13 years, who is an elementary school teacher and school bus driver, have been foster and adoptive parents and are together raising eight children.

“We salute the flag at the games, but part of me feels like it isn’t for me. I work, pay taxes, and try every day to do right by my family and God,” Hopkins said. “In school, they teach our kids that everybody’s vote counts, but no matter how I’ve lived for the past 20 years, I don’t count. Not my values and not my experience. I have paid Mississippi what I owe it in full, but I still can’t cast my vote for my children’s’ future.”



Walter Wayne Kuhn Jr.

Walter Wayne Kuhn Jr., 47, is a U.S. Army veteran and comes from a military family. He was convicted of grand larceny over 18 years ago. His conviction has since been expunged. For years, he has ministered to homeless and incarcerated men about overcoming drug addiction, including a weekly “Celebrate Recovery” class at his church. In those classes, Kuhn says, “I tell them you can turn your life around by just doing the next right thing because God forgives, even if Mississippi doesn’t.”



Byron Coleman

Byron Coleman, 54, lost his right to vote when he was convicted of receiving stolen goods in 1997. He currently lives in Jackson. Before suffering a massive stroke that left him physically disabled seven years ago, Coleman worked as a delivery driver.

“When I was younger, I didn’t think my vote counted. As I’ve gotten older, I pay more attention to the news, so I understand why it is so important.”



Jon O’Neal

Jon O’Neal, 37, lost his right to vote in 1997 after he was convicted of second-degree arson. He currently lives in Hattiesburg.

“Politics was a big part of my life and now it’s just gone,” O’Neal said. “I was very political and now I’m nothing.”



Earnest Willhite

Earnest Willhite, 36, lost his right to vote after he was convicted of grand larceny in 1997. He currently lives in Jackson, where he works as a mechanic.