



Fighting to Restore Voting Access to All in Mississippi

Mississippi's approach to disenfranchisement is unique among all other states in the nation. The state constitution imposes a lifetime voting ban for those who have been convicted of certain felonies.

These laws, adopted in the Jim Crow era, were explicitly designed to suppress the voting rights of Black people. The drafters included crimes perceived as being committed more often by Black people, such as burglary and theft, as disqualifying. However, violent crimes more likely to have been committed by white people, such as murder and rape, are not.

As a result, over 230,000 Mississippians, or 1 in 10 adults in the state, are barred from voting – a rate far exceeding the national average. The Southern Poverty Law Center and our allies have worked, through litigation and legislative advocacy, to end this restriction. We argue that this policy creates barriers to reintegration into society for those who have completed their sentences. Ensuring people with prior convictions have access to participate fully in democracy is foundational to the rehabilitative process, allowing individuals to make change for their families and community. Research also shows that allowing formerly incarcerated individuals to vote lowers recidivism rates.

In August 2023, in response to a case brought by the SPLC and co-counsel – *Hopkins v. Hosemann* – the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit struck down Mississippi's 19th century disenfranchisement scheme, which is one of the cruelest in the nation. In a historic decision, the appeals court found that the Mississippi law – which bars individuals convicted of certain crimes, some very minor, from voting in Mississippi for life – was a violation of the U.S. Constitution's ban against cruel and unusual punishment.

Unfortunately, in July 2024, the full panel of judges comprising the Fifth Circuit overturned that decision, declining to restore voting rights to tens of thousands of Mississippians. What's more, it said that Mississippi's felony disenfranchisement laws can only be changed by the state's legislature. Notably, six judges dissented with that opinion.

Unfortunately, Section 241 is still in effect.

- Registering to vote when you are not qualified will result in criminal penalties.
- In the interim, you may request to restore your voting rights.
- Join us in advocating for an end to permanent felony disenfranchisement in Mississippi.
- If you or someone you love has been impacted by these policies, call or email your legislature to tell your story.

For more information contact Sonya Williams Barnes, Mississippi Policy Director, at sonya.williamsbarnes@splcenter.org or visit splcenter.org.

Federal Recommendations

As ground zero for historic and contemporary voting rights struggles, the voices and experiences of Mississippians are critical to help protect the right to vote nationally. We are working closely with our colleagues and coalition partners in Washington, D.C., to advance federal legislation that restores and modernizes the Voting Rights Act of 1965, sets national minimum standards for election administration, and increases federal funding for state and local election administration. Specifically, we are advocating for swift passage of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, the Freedom to Vote Act, and significant funding for election administration in the fiscal year 2025 federal budget and beyond.