

Advocacy Plan

Goal

The primary goal of Defend Democracy is to get SB0589 passed in the Tennessee General Assembly. This will amend the Tennessee Code Annotated Section 2-2-102 and Title 40, Chapter 29 by limiting the period when a felony conviction renders a person ineligible to vote to the period when the person is incarcerated, serving parole, or on probation. Additionally, this bill specifies that the restoration of voting rights must not be denied based on an individual's inability or failure to pay civil or criminal penalties and makes issuance of a certificate of voting rights restoration mandatory for releasing authorities.

Focus and Target Population

The main focus for the Defend Democracy campaign will be on the legislature, within the state of Tennessee, since they are the ones who have the power to be able to change the laws. While the focus of the campaign will be on the legislative sector, those who will be affected by this policy change will be part of the public. The intended beneficiaries are felons who have successfully completed their sentences in Tennessee.

Advocacy Strategy

As a result of ongoing advocacy efforts across the United States, attention toward the prevalence of felony voter disenfranchisement and its consequences continues to grow. Increased awareness of voter disenfranchisement legislation has prompted policy makers and advocates in a number of states to take action and to push for laws that seek to eradicate an issue that has disproportionately affected marginalized communities for decades. Several social justice initiatives, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and The Sentencing Project, have released reports that highlight the history and implications of voter disenfranchisement as

well as effective advocacy strategies that will be utilized by Defend Democracy to combat this pertinent issue.

In 2003, Michael Coyle, a research assistant at The Sentencing Project, released a briefing that highlighted state-based advocacy on felony disenfranchisement. This briefing assessed the successful advocacy efforts of coalitions in three states: Connecticut, Delaware, and Maryland. In Connecticut, legislation signed into law in 2001 granted felons on probation the right to vote; In Delaware, the lifetime voting ban on ex-felons was removed and replaced with a five-year waiting period upon completion of a sentence; in Maryland, similar legislation was enacted that removed the lifetime voting ban on ex-felons and replaced it with a three-year waiting period upon completion of a sentence (Coyle, 2003). Although each campaign was specifically tailored to the political climate at the time, each one remains relevant and instructive for advocates seeking change on this issue (Coyle, 2003).

Although the campaigns of the aforementioned states differed in their approaches, several characteristics are apparent within each one: organization of a coalition, determination, persistence, and education. In 2001, a diverse coalition of civil rights advocates and election reform advocates formed the Connecticut Voting Rights Restoration Coalition (Coyle, 2003). Collectively, the coalition developed many strategies to achieve its victory. When the proposed bill to restore voting rights to convicted felons initially failed, the coalition garnered support through ongoing work in the community, such as creating public awareness through education efforts that included billboards in English and Spanish, public education campaigns that targeted both legislators and the wider community and communicating through the media via newspaper articles and radio (Coyle, 2003). Through their tireless efforts, they were gradually able to develop key allies in the Senate and in the broader community (Coyle, 2003). They accredited

their eventual success to forming a coalition and ensuring everyone is on-board, pointing out that, although this takes time, “without it, success is difficult” (Coyle, 2003). Coalition leaders also insisted that having a clear idea of the constituency and strong leadership in the community and in the legislature is critical, citing that “a bill cannot be passed without political leadership, a coalition of advocates, and developing a working relationship with key legislative leaders” (Coyle, 2003).

In Delaware, a state that had denied individuals convicted of a felony the right to vote since the 1800s, the Delaware Center for Justice formed an alliance for the restoration of voting rights for convicted felons in 1990 (Coyle, 2003). Initially, the alliance gained traction when a local peace group became interested and garnered support from others in the community, including labor unions, the NAACP, and the ACLU (Coyle, 2003). These early lobbying efforts proved to be very successful and led to eventual support in both the House and the Senate, despite the refusal of Senator James Vaughn to move on the issue (Coyle, 2003). However, coalition members demonstrated exceptional determination as the partners met monthly for ten years and maintained a strong political presence (Coyle, 2003). In response to Senator Vaughn, the election commission innovatively proposed a solution: a viable system that utilized the correction’s database to track an ex-felon’s completion of parole and restitutions; in response to this, the Senator agreed to send the bill to the floor, where it passed with a large majority in 2000 (Coyle, 2003).

Similar strategies were demonstrated in Maryland, where a coalition was formed that consisted of fifty organizations, including the NAACP, League of Women Voters, religious organizations, and ex-offender groups (Coyle, 2003). Doc Cheatam, widely recognized as the driving force behind the Maryland Voting Rights Coalition, accredits the success of enacting

HB535 and SB104 to the forming of the coalition in itself, in addition to the diverse representation within the coalition and the efforts that went into each aspect of the campaign: rallies, posters, mailings, flyers, and other media (Coyle, 2003). Doc Cheatham also advised that coalitions must take advantage of the current political climate and “put a face on the issue”, reporting that, in Maryland, “legislators who were on the fence or who did not know much about the issue were deeply influenced by ex-felon testimonies of how disenfranchisement affected their lives” (Coyle, 2003).

Recent advocacy efforts towards felony voter re-enfranchisement reflect the advocacy strategies demonstrated by their predecessors and also those outlined in Pat Libby’s Lobbying Strategy Handbook (2011). In 2008, ACLU released a report titled “Breaking Barriers to the Ballot Box: Felon Enfranchisement Toolkit” as part of their Right to Vote campaign. The report provides several evidence-based strategies that, when combined, will assist in the launch of a successful Defend Democracy advocacy campaign. The strategies mentioned include forming a coalition of diverse organizations, identifying and engaging key allies in communities of color, involving formerly incarcerated individuals, and conducting state-based research consisting of surveys that measure state and county election officials’ knowledge and implementation of voter disenfranchisement and restoration policy (ACLU, 2008).

In the Lobbying Strategy Handbook (Libby, 2011), two key elements mentioned regarding successful advocacy campaigns are developing educational materials and launching a media campaign. This is also highlighted in ACLU’s (2008) report, which emphasizes forming a comprehensive public education strategy and using technological tools to educate and mobilize. A low-cost way to raise awareness and garner support for Defend Democracy is through the utilization of social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A notable example

of such efforts is in Kentucky, where voting rights activists have posted video stories on YouTube and communicate regularly via a listserv dedicated to monitoring legislative developments (ACLU, 2008).

Although social media campaigns can be beneficial and useful, Libby (2011) does advise that policymakers are more likely to pay attention to a cause that has received significant press coverage. To accomplish this, ACLU (2008) suggests that advocates calibrate their strategy to the partisan environment of their state legislature and continually reach out to policymakers through letters and phone calls. Additionally, utilizing key criminal justice and legal agencies nationally and locally, such as the ACLU, CALEB, The Equity Alliance, and The Sentencing Project, to leverage support for Demand Democracy has the potential to provoke widespread coverage of the issue and, in turn, elicit prominent support for Defend Democracy at the local and state levels.

References

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