To secure the Federal voting rights of persons when released from incarceration.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. Cardin (for himself, Mr. Schatz, Mr. Padilla, Mr. Casey, Mrs. Feinstein, Ms. Warren, Mr. Markey, Mr. Menendez, Ms. Smith, Mr. Welch, Ms. Baldwin, Mr. Booker, Mr. Blumenthal, Ms. Klobuchar, Mr. Sanders, Mrs. Murray, Mr. Wyden, Mr. Van Hollen, Ms. Hirono, Mrs. Shaheen, Mr. Kaine, and Mr. Brown) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on ____________________

A BILL

To secure the Federal voting rights of persons when released from incarceration.

1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-
2 tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
3 SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.
4 This Act may be cited as the “Democracy Restoration
5 Act of 2023”.
6 SEC. 2. FINDINGS.
7 Congress makes the following findings:
(1) The right to vote is the most basic constitutive act of citizenship. Regaining the right to vote reintegrates individuals with criminal convictions into free society, helping to enhance public safety.

(2) Article I, section 4, of the Constitution grants Congress ultimate supervisory power over Federal elections, an authority which has repeatedly been upheld by the United States Supreme Court.

(3) Basic constitutional principles of fairness and equal protection require an equal opportunity for citizens of the United States to vote in Federal elections. The right to vote may not be abridged or denied by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, gender, or previous condition of servitude. The 13th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments to the Constitution empower Congress to enact measures to protect the right to vote in Federal elections. The 8th Amendment to the Constitution provides for no excessive bail to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

(4) There are 3 areas in which discrepancies in State laws regarding criminal convictions lead to unfairness in Federal elections—
(A) the lack of a uniform standard for voting in Federal elections leads to an unfair disparity and unequal participation in Federal elections based solely on where a person lives; 

(B) laws governing the restoration of voting rights after a criminal conviction vary throughout the country and persons in some States can easily regain their voting rights while in other States persons effectively lose their right to vote permanently; and 

(C) State disenfranchisement laws disproportionately impact racial and ethnic minorities.

(5) State disenfranchisement laws vary widely. Two States (Maine and Vermont) and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico do not disenfranchise individuals with criminal convictions at all. In 2020, the District of Columbia re-enfranchised its citizens who are under the supervision of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Twenty-five States disenfranchise certain individuals on felony probation or parole. During 2023, lawmakers in Minnesota and New Mexico expanded voting rights to citizens on felony probation and parole. In 11 States, a conviction for certain offenses can result in lifetime disenfranchisement.
(6) Several States deny the right to vote to individuals convicted of certain misdemeanors.

(7) In 2022, over 4,600,000 citizens of the United States, or about 1 in 50 adults in the United States, could not vote as a result of a felony conviction. Of the 4,600,000 citizens barred from voting then, only 23 percent were in prison or jail. By contrast, 75 percent of persons disenfranchised then resided in their communities while on probation or parole or after having completed their sentences. Approximately 2,200,000 citizens who had completed their sentences were disenfranchised due to restrictive State laws. Over 930,000 Floridians who completed their sentence remain disenfranchised because of a pay-to-vote requirement that was enacted by Florida lawmakers in 2019 to undermine the impact of a 2018 ballot initiative that eliminated the lifetime ban for persons with certain felony convictions. In 3 States—Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee—more than 8 percent of the total population is disenfranchised.

(8) In those States that disenfranchise individuals post-sentence, the right to vote can be regained in theory, but in practice this possibility is often granted in a non-uniform and potentially discrimina-
tory manner. Disenfranchised individuals sometimes
must either obtain a pardon or an order from the
Governor or an action by the parole or pardon
board, depending on the offense and State. Financial
restrictions may also inhibit individuals who have
completed their sentences from re-enfranchisement.
Individuals convicted of a Federal offense often have
additional barriers to regaining voting rights.

(9) Many felony disenfranchisement laws today
derive directly from post-Civil War efforts to stifle
the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Between
1865 and 1880, at least 14 States—Alabama, Ar-
kansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Mis-
issippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Caro-
olina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas—en-
acted or expanded their felony disenfranchisement
laws. One of the primary goals of these laws was to
prevent African Americans from voting. Of the
States that enacted or expanded their felony dis-
enfranchisement laws during this post-Civil War pe-
riod, at least 11 continue to preclude persons on fel-
ony probation or parole from voting.

(10) State disenfranchisement laws dispropor-
tionately impact racial and ethnic minorities. In re-
cent years, African Americans have been imprisoned
at over 5 times the rate of Whites. More than 6 percent of the voting-age African-American population, or 1,800,000 African Americans, are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction. In 9 States—Alabama (16 percent), Arizona (13 percent), Florida (15 percent), Kentucky (15 percent), Mississippi (16 percent), South Dakota (14 percent), Tennessee (21 percent), Virginia (16 percent), and Wyoming (36 percent)—more than 1 in 8 African Americans are unable to vote because of a felony conviction, twice the national average for African Americans.

(11) Latino citizens are also disproportionately disenfranchised based upon their disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system. Although data on ethnicity in correctional populations are unevenly reported and undercounted in some States, a conservative estimate is that at least 506,000 Latino Americans or 1.7 percent of the voting-age population are disenfranchised. More than 2 percent of the voting-age Latino population, or 560,000 Latinos, are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction. In 31 States Latinos are disenfranchised at a higher rate than the general population. In Arizona and Tennessee over 6 percent of Latino voters are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction.
(12) Women have been significantly impacted by mass incarceration since the early 1980s. Approximately 1,000,000 women were disenfranchised in 2022, comprising over 20 percent of the total disenfranchised population.

(13) Disenfranchising citizens who have been convicted of a criminal offense and who are living and working in the community serves no compelling State interest and hinders their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Models of successful re-entry for persons convicted of a crime emphasize the importance of community ties, feeling vested and integrated, and prosocial attitudes. Individuals with criminal convictions who succeed in avoiding recidivism are typically more likely to see themselves as law-abiding members of the community. Restoration of voting rights builds those qualities and facilitates reintegration into the community. That is why allowing citizens with criminal convictions who are living in a community to vote is correlated with a lower likelihood of recidivism. Restoration of voting rights thus reduces violence and protects public safety.

(14) State disenfranchisement laws can suppress electoral participation among eligible voters by discouraging voting among family and community
members of disenfranchised persons. Future elec-
toral participation by the children of disenfranchised
parents may be impacted as well.

(15) The United States is one of the only West-
ern democracies that permits the permanent denial
of voting rights for individuals with felony convic-
tions.

(16) The Eighth Amendment’s prohibition on
cruel and unusual punishments “guarantees individ-
uals the right not to be subjected to excessive sanc-
tions.” (Roper v. Simmons, 543 U.S. 551, 560
(2005)). That right stems from the basic precept of
justice “that punishment for crime should be grad-
uated and proportioned to [the] offense.” Id.
(quoting Weems v. United States, 217 U.S. 349, 367
(1910)). As the Supreme Court has long recognized,
“[t]he concept of proportionality is central to the
Eighth Amendment.” (Graham v. Florida, 560 U.S.
48, 59 (2010)). Many State disenfranchisement laws
are grossly disproportional to the offenses that lead
to disenfranchisement and thus violate the bar on
cruel and unusual punishments. For example, a
number of States mandate lifetime disenfranchise-
ment for a single felony conviction or just two felony
convictions, even where the convictions were for non-
violent offenses. In numerous other States, disenfranchisement can last years or even decades while individuals remain on probation or parole, often only because a person cannot pay their legal financial obligations. These kinds of extreme voting bans run afoul of the Eighth Amendment.

(17) The Twenty-Fourth Amendment provides that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.” Section 2 of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment gives Congress the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation. Court fines and fees that individuals must pay to have their voting rights restored constitute an “other tax” for purposes of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment. At least five States explicitly require the payment of fines and fees before individuals with felony convictions can have their voting rights restored. More than 20 other States effectively tie the right to vote to the payment of fines and fees, by requiring that individuals complete their probation or parole before their rights are restored. In these States, the non-payment of fines and fees is a basis on which probation or parole can be extended. Moreover, these States sometimes do not
record the basis on which an individual’s probation
or parole was extended, making it impossible to de-
termine from the State’s records whether non-pay-
ment of fines and fees is the reason that an indi-
vidual remains on probation or parole. For these
reasons, the only way to ensure that States do not
deny the right to vote based solely on non-payment
of fines and fees is to prevent States from condi-
tioning voting rights on the completion of probation
or parole.

**SEC. 3. RIGHTS OF CITIZENS.**

The right of an individual who is a citizen of the
United States to vote in any election for Federal office
shall not be denied or abridged because that individual has
been convicted of a criminal offense unless such individual
is serving a felony sentence in a correctional institution
or facility at the time of the election.

**SEC. 4. ENFORCEMENT.**

(a) **ATTORNEY GENERAL.**—The Attorney General
may, in a civil action, obtain such declaratory or injunctive
relief as is necessary to remedy a violation of this Act.

(b) **PRIVATE RIGHT OF ACTION.**—

(1) **IN GENERAL.**—A person who is aggrieved
by a violation of this Act may provide written notice
of the violation to the chief election official of the State involved.

(2) RELIEF.—Except as provided in paragraph (3), if the violation is not corrected within 90 days after receipt of a notice under paragraph (1), or within 20 days after receipt of the notice if the violation occurred within 120 days before the date of an election for Federal office, the aggrieved person may, in a civil action, obtain declaratory or injunctive relief with respect to the violation.

(3) EXCEPTION.—If the violation occurred within 30 days before the date of an election for Federal office, the aggrieved person need not provide notice to the chief election official of the State under paragraph (1) before bringing a civil action to obtain declaratory or injunctive relief with respect to the violation.

SEC. 5. NOTIFICATION OF RESTORATION OF VOTING RIGHTS.

(a) STATE NOTIFICATION.—

(1) NOTIFICATION.—On the date determined under paragraph (2), each State shall notify in writing any individual who has been convicted of a criminal offense under the law of that State that such individual has the right to vote in an election
for Federal office pursuant to the Democracy Restoration Act of 2023 and may register to vote in any such election and provide such individuals with any materials that are necessary to register to vote in any such election.

(2) DATE OF NOTIFICATION.—

(A) Felony conviction.—In the case of such an individual who has been convicted of a felony, the notification required under paragraph (1) shall be given on the date on which the individual—

(i) is sentenced to serve only a term of probation; or

(ii) is released from the custody of that State (other than to the custody of another State or the Federal Government to serve a term of imprisonment for a felony conviction).

(B) Misdemeanor conviction.—In the case of such an individual who has been convicted of a misdemeanor, the notification required under paragraph (1) shall be given on the date on which such individual is sentenced by a State court.

(b) Federal Notification.—
(1) Notification.—Any individual who has been convicted of a criminal offense under Federal law shall be notified in accordance with paragraph (2) that such individual has the right to vote in an election for Federal office pursuant to the Democracy Restoration Act of 2023 and may register to vote in any such election.

(2) Date of Notification.—

(A) Felony Conviction.—In the case of such an individual who has been convicted of a felony, the notification required under paragraph (1) shall be given—

(i) in the case of an individual who is sentenced to serve only a term of probation, by the Assistant Director for the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts on the date on which the individual is sentenced; or

(ii) in the case of any individual committed to the custody of the Bureau of Prisons, by the Director of the Bureau of Prisons, during the period beginning on the date that is 6 months before such individual is released and ending on the date
such individual is released from the custody of the Bureau of Prisons.

(B) MISDEMEANOR CONVICTION.—In the case of such an individual who has been convicted of a misdemeanor, the notification required under paragraph (1) shall be given on the date on which such individual is sentenced by a court established by an Act of Congress.

SEC. 6. DEFINITIONS.

For purposes of this Act:

(1) CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION OR FACILITY.—The term “correctional institution or facility” means any prison, penitentiary, jail, or other institution or facility for the confinement of individuals convicted of criminal offenses, whether publicly or privately operated, except that such term does not include any residential community treatment center (or similar public or private facility).

(2) ELECTION.—The term “election” means—

(A) a general, special, primary, or runoff election;

(B) a convention or caucus of a political party held to nominate a candidate;
(C) a primary election held for the selection of delegates to a national nominating convention of a political party; or

(D) a primary election held for the expression of a preference for the nomination of persons for election to the office of President.

(3) FEDERAL OFFICE.—The term “Federal office” means the office of President or Vice President of the United States, or of Senator or Representative in, or Delegate or Resident Commissioner to, the Congress of the United States.

(4) PROBATION.—The term “probation” means probation, imposed by a Federal, State, or local court, with or without a condition on the individual involved concerning—

(A) the individual’s freedom of movement;

(B) the payment of damages by the individual;

(C) periodic reporting by the individual to an officer of the court; or

(D) supervision of the individual by an officer of the court.

SEC. 7. RELATION TO OTHER LAWS.

(a) STATE LAWS RELATING TO VOTING RIGHTS.—Nothing in this Act shall be construed to prohibit any
State from enacting any State law which affords the right
to vote in any election for Federal office on terms less
restrictive than those established by this Act.

(b) CERTAIN FEDERAL ACTS.—The rights and rem-
edies established by this Act are in addition to all other
rights and remedies provided by law, and neither rights
and remedies established by this Act shall supersede, re-
strict, or limit the application of the Voting Rights Act
of 1965 (52 U.S.C. 10301 et seq.), the National Voter
Registration Act (52 U.S.C. 20501), or the Help America
Vote Act of 2002 (52 U.S.C. 20901 et seq.).

SEC. 8. FEDERAL PRISON FUNDS.

No State, unit of local government, or other person
may receive or use, to construct or otherwise improve a
prison, jail, or other place of incarceration, any Federal
funds unless that State, unit of local government, or per-
son—

(1) is in compliance with section 3; and

(2) has in effect a program under which each
individual incarcerated in that person’s jurisdiction
who is a citizen of the United States is notified,
upon release from such incarceration, of that indi-
vidual’s rights under section 3.
1 SEC. 9. EFFECTIVE DATE.
2 This Act shall apply to citizens of the United States
3 voting in any election for Federal office held on or after
4 the date of the enactment of this Act.