Rhode Island’s original constitution was unique for extending the right to vote to African-Americans. By 1855, Rhode Island was only one of five Northern states to do so, making the state’s suffrage laws among the most inclusive in the country.¹ Today, however, this report finds that Rhode Island ranks thirteenth in the nation for the highest percentage of African-Americans who are barred from voting due to the state’s felony disfranchisement law.

The African-American disfranchisement rate in Rhode Island is higher than that in thirty-seven other states. Rhode Island takes away the right to vote of African-Americans at a higher rate than Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee (Table 2).

Rhode Island’s constitution takes away the right to vote of any person convicted of a felony while in prison, on parole, or probation.² This is the most restrictive law in all of New England. As a result, Rhode Island disfranchises a greater percentage of its population than any other state in the region.

### Key Findings

- Rhode Island has the nation’s 13th highest percentage of African-American disfranchisement, higher than Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, North and South Carolina and 31 other states
- 12 percent of African-Americans are barred from voting in Rhode Island
- 20 percent of African-American men cannot vote statewide
- 1 in 4 African-American men in Providence cannot vote
- 40 percent of 18-34 year old African-American men on the Southside of Providence cannot vote

### Table 1

| Percent of Rhode Island Adult Population Disfranchised for Each Racial Group
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>1.90%</td>
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¹ Rhode Island’s Shrinking Black Electorate

February 2005

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Rhode Island’s high rates are primarily due to two factors. First, terms of probation are longer and assigned more often in Rhode Island than elsewhere. The percentage of adults on probation in Rhode Island (3.1 percent) is the 2nd highest in the country. Second, African-Americans are disproportionately involved with the justice system. Rhode Island has the nation’s 10th highest disparity between black and white incarceration rates. The disparity is driven by unequal rates of imprisonment for drug offenses: blacks are incarcerated at thirty (30) times the rate of whites in the state for drugs.

The voting rights of Rhode Island’s urban African-American population are most severely impacted. In Providence and Newport more than 1 in 4 African-American men cannot vote (Table 3). In Atlanta, Georgia, a city in a state with the same disfranchisement policy, only 1 in 7 African-American men are barred from the polls. Within Providence, African-American men are disfranchised at rates of over 30 percent in parts of South Providence, Olneyville, West End, Hartford, Manton, and Silver Lake (Figure 1). In these geographic areas, less than 70 percent of adult African-American men are eligible to vote. In the Southside of Providence, 40 percent of African-American men aged 18-34 cannot vote due to a felony conviction.

With so many barred from the polls, the impact goes beyond the individual. The political voices of entire families are lost when a single parent cannot vote. In citywide and statewide elections, the political power of entire neighborhoods is diluted by high rates of disfranchisement.

The numbers of eligible African-American voters is declining in Rhode Island. The state’s prison population has increased by 625 percent over the last 30 years. The percentage on probation has also grown. In 1987 an estimated 9,400 state residents were barred from voting; today more than 15,758 are disfranchised, a 67 percent increase. While the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made many discriminatory forms of disfranchisement illegal, felon disfranchisement laws are significantly eroding Rhode Island’s black electorate. As a result, the strength and inclusiveness of Rhode Island’s democracy is diminishing.
State Disenfranchisement Laws

No disenfranchisement for felony convictions:
ME, VT

Voting restored after release from prison:
HI, IL, IN, MA, MI, MT, NH, ND, OH, OR, PA, SD, UT

Voting restored after release from incarceration and completion of parole (probationers may vote):
CA, CO, CT, NY

Voting restored after completion of sentence, including parole and probation:
AK, AR, GA, ID, KS, LA, MN, MO, NJ, NM, NC, OK, RI, SC, TX, WV, WI

Permanent disenfranchisement for some felony convictions:
AZ, DE, MD, MS, NV, TN, WA, WY

Disenfranchisement for all felony convictions, no automatic restoration:
AL, FL, IA, KY, NE, VA

Notes

2 Rhode Island Constitution, Article II, Section I. (Accessible at: http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/gen_assembly/RiConstitution/C02.htm)
3 Nina Keough and Marshall Clement, Political Punishment: The Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement for Rhode Island Communities, Rhode Island Family Life Center, September 2004. (Accessible at: http://ri-familylifecenter.org/reports/PoliticalPunishment.pdf)
4 Excerpt from: Keough and Clement, Political Punishment.
7 Human Rights Watch, “Punishment and Prejudice: Racial Disparities in the War on Drugs,” May 2000; Analysis of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections Sentenced Population by the RI Family Life Center found that in 2003, blacks in RI were incarcerated at 30 times the rate of whites for drug offenses. Latinos were incarcerated at 15 times the rate of whites. See: RI Family Life Center, Impacts of Incarceration and Reentry, (Accessible at: http://ri-familylifecenter.org/pagetool/reports/FLCImpacts_of_Reentry012805.pdf). National studies of drug use have consistently found roughly proportional use of illegal substances across racial groups.
10 See Keough and Clement, Political Punishment, September 2004; Estimates of disenfranchised in 1987 based on the proportion of those in prison, on parole or probation, who were disfranchised in 2003 (65%). Applying this estimate of the percent disfranchised to Rhode Island state budget data showing a combined population in prison or under community supervision of 14,481 yields an estimated 9,412 residents without the vote in 1987.
11 Excerpt from: Keough and Clement, Political Punishment.
12 Statistics cited from: Keough and Clement, Political Punishment.
13 Right to Vote, “At the State Level.” (Accessible at: http://www.righttovote.org/state.asp)