

Haileybury MUN

Research report



Human Rights 2

The question of the Disenfranchisement of Minorities

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Definitions:

“Disenfranchisement”

The notion of being “disenfranchised” is defined in two ways by the Cambridge English dictionary – a) **not having the right to vote, or a similar right, or having had that right taken away** and b) **having no power to make people listen to your opinion or to affect the society you live in**. The inability to vote in numerous member states of the United Nations extends from a number of factors, most notably the attitudes towards criminals, as well as people of different faiths or races to the majority. In every case, disenfranchisement extends fundamentally from being in a minority, which is both politically and legally suppressed from expressing its view. As the definition puts it, the inability to “affect society” can be considered to have a negative impact on domestic operation in general, as well as hindering the implementation of development goals.

“Minorities”

Again to the Cambridge English Dictionary, a ‘minority’ is considered to be **“any small group in society that is different from the rest because of their race, religion, or political beliefs, or a person who belongs to such a group”**.

“Felony”

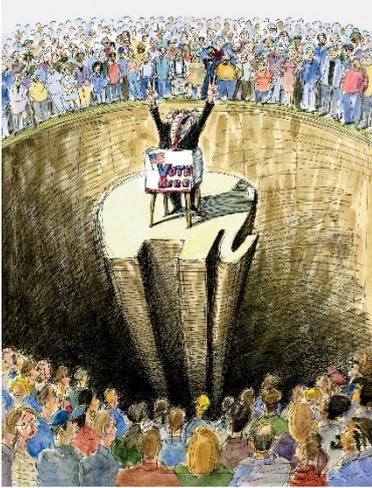
An important term when considering why many people are not afforded the right to vote. Defined by the CED as **“serious crime that can be punished by one or more years in prison”**.

Introduction:

The concept that millions of a nation’s own citizens might not be able to exercise the right to vote seems an uncomfortable one at the very least. What is more discomfiting, however, is when we reveal such statistics to arise from United Nations member states that widely consider themselves democratic ‘word-leaders’, the United States of America being the most notable in this case. Despite this, disenfranchisement is a concept that has affected nearly every member nation of the UN at some point, as would naturally be expected, as societies over the course of the last 150 years or so have moved to an increasingly fair and more democratic system of giving the entirety of the population a say on the operations and policies of governments. The difficulty has been in distributing equal power amongst a nation’s citizens, and it is this issue, complex as it is, that has provoked the greatest scrutiny on behalf of the United Nations over this issue. In turn, this organisation has been resolute in promoting political engagement at all levels as part of its Sustainable Development Goals.

Since 2016’s US election, and Donald Trump’s surprise emergence as the winning candidate, much scrutiny has been poured over the widespread disenfranchisement actions taken by this presidency, for whatever

reason, that has particularly, and disproportionately, affected black males, many of whom reside in Southern states. The figure then was running at an estimated 6 million Americans – 6 million who had no right to vote. Whilst it is difficult, of course, to attribute this figure to any particular political tactic, what stands assured is that minority disenfranchisement is certainly not a relic of the American Reconstruction era, as is demonstrated by this *Rolling Stone* cartoon criticising Republican party tactics including voter-ID enforcement, and gerrymandering.



However, lest we attribute this issue too greatly to the US, it is also important to bear in mind how general, unreported disenfranchisement has been perpetuated globally over many years. This includes voter intimidation at the ballot box, or outright prevention of voting rights: take, for example, the act that *Dalit* minority groups in India have for decades faced violent attacks at ballot boxes in an effort to prevent them voting, despite government intervention to ease the effects of active discrimination. The issue was so serious that the Indian organisation – the National Dalit Election Watch (NDEW) – had nearly 4000 volunteers stationed at village polling stations to protect voters.

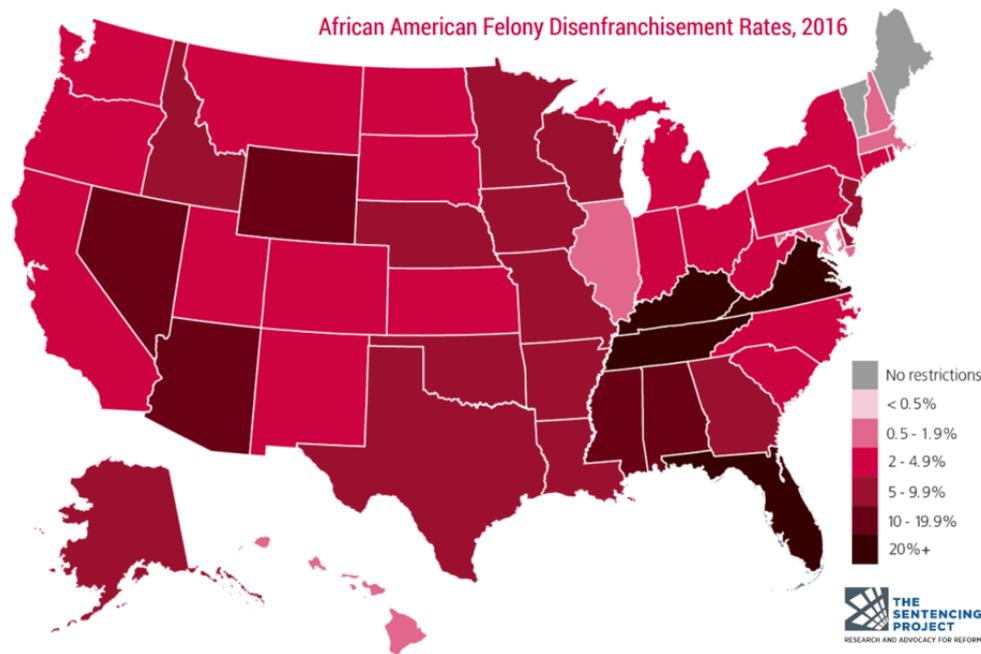
The effects of minority disenfranchisement can often be watered-down, considered not too important in the grand scheme of things. However, the social consequences of disenfranchisement often include a greater chance of political unrest, widespread violence and the growth of extreme political parties. In the case of the United States, it has provoked.

There are generally considered to be a few key reasons for pursuing, or maintaining, minority disenfranchisement:

- For a government or political party unpopular amongst a minority group, disenfranchisement is essentially a silencing mechanism to quell political unrest
- Religious beliefs often dictate that a person is less worthy of equal citizenship rights based on their beliefs, and thus is not worth of having the vote
- Disenfranchisement can be used effectively to skew elections in favour of certain political parties: however, some reports do indicate that statistical errors in analysing aforementioned voter ID data alternatively indicates that there is little overall effect politically – socially, however, it is easy to see how discontent may be fostered amongst communities
- Felony Convictions– this has been the most contentious issue regarding minority disenfranchisement, with a general move to place increasing limits on not just prisoners, but former convicts. Prisoners themselves are inherently a minority, and the act of disenfranchisement intended to indicate ‘civic death’. The government of the United Kingdom has come under repeated fire for delaying the implementation of prison voting reform to allow prisoners to vote, after the European Union ruled this form of disenfranchisement in breach of Article 3 of the First Protocol of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Key Statistics:

- 68% of black respondents in a 2016 PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute of America) poll stated that they believed that disenfranchisement major electoral problem in the United States of America, alongside the fact that the same poll indicated that those from black or Hispanic backgrounds were twice as likely as white Americans to have been refused time off work to vote.
- As a result of recent voter-ID enforcement, 19% of black and Hispanic voters stated in the aforementioned poll they or a family member lacked proper identification, and a total of 21% of this same ethnic group said they were incorrectly told that were not listed of voter rolls.
- North Dakota’s controversial ID restrictions, requiring the inclusion of a permanent residential address, were in the run up to the 2016 elections, predicted to disenfranchise the majority of the Native American population.



Possible Solutions:

- As mentioned previously regarding prison reform, a possible solution would lie in a nation's ability to make conscious efforts to remove the underlying bureaucracy behind many changes to voting systems, so as not to alienate minorities who may have a limited understanding of the legal jargon accompanying their right to vote.
- Encouraging, rather than limiting, diverse political discussion would surely help to promote a wider range of views, and help minority communities feel less socially excluded, and as if their right to vote, and to an opinion, actually matters to the government- this of course is dependent on the issue of national free speech restrictions, which bear in mind the UN continues to take a dim view of.
- Promoting international cooperation to draw up guidelines for what entitles an individual to vote, which can have contributions from a range of different experts to produce a comprehensive framework that can be applied universally, rather than allowing a select number of individuals to turn human rights into a bargaining chip for political power gains.

Useful Links:

The following links are intended to reflect a reasonably wide beginning-of-further research pool, however, there is plenty of material out on the internet, or available in libraries, that discusses this matter further. Remember to bear in mind the global nature of disenfranchisement, and not attribute it solely to either the United States of America, or its current issues with race relations.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/poll-prri-voter-suppression/565355/>

<https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2224&context=caselrev>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/31/a-threat-to-democracy-republicans-war-on-minority-voters>

<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/electoral-exclusion-muslims-continues-plague-indian-democracy>

<https://academic.oup.com/esr/article/32/3/339/2453403> -

<https://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1252&context=blrlj>

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/WhatWeDo/ProjectsResearch/Citizenship/BarredfromVoting/Whyprisonersneedthevote>