Who Gets TO VOTE?

CONVERSATIONS ON VOTING RIGHTS IN AMERICA

DISCUSSION GUIDE

LOCKED OUT
FELON DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
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1. Before reading *Locked Out*, how would you characterize your understanding of felon disenfranchisement? Has that understanding changed? If so, how?

2. In 1972 the proportion of people incarcerated in the United States was 94 per 100,000. In the early 2000s, despite a steady decline in overall crime rates, it was 714 per 100,000, and in 2020 it was 655 per 100,000. What factors have contributed to such a steep increase over the last 50 years? Are you aware of reforms in Louisiana that may be contributing to the more recent reduction?

3. The authors describe felon disenfranchisement as “a failure to make good on the promise of universal suffrage” (8). Do you believe such a promise has been made or implied in American life? Why or why not?

4. Is there value in mass civic participation? If yes, what is the value? If not, why? Who, if anyone, should be restricted from voting?

5. The authors state: “Racial stereotyping about criminality has been pervasive” (47). Can you think of well known—or lesser known—examples that support this claim? Is racial stereotyping a recent phenomenon? What are the implications of such stereotypes? How are their effects compounded by their deep historical roots?

6. What does society hope to achieve when imprisoning an individual? Do you believe offenders can be rehabilitated? Why or why not? How might voting rights be tied to rehabilitation?

7. Is a one-size-fits-all treatment of felons and ex-felons sensible? If you had the ability to change felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States, what would you do? What might you change? What would you leave in place?

8. *Locked Out* is a book about felon disenfranchisement, but it is also a book about how race-based discrimination has historically been part of many states’
legal and electoral systems. Do you think there’s a connection between felon disenfranchisement and race-based discrimination? Why or why not?

9. Does felon disenfranchisement affect only the felon convicted of a crime? Who else might be impacted?

10. What role might voting rights (or a lack of voting rights) play in the civic reintegration of felons who have completed their sentences? Is there a connection between successful civic reintegration and reduction of recidivism rates? Is it reasonable to expect ex-felons who have served their full sentences to go through clemency procedures to regain their voting rights? Why or why not? What does the clemency process require?

11. The authors underscore the low turnout of the voting age population in the US relative to other countries, citing an early 2000s international survey that ranked the US 138th among 170 countries. Since 2000, according to statistics from the American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara, voting in presidential elections rose from 50.5 percent in 2000 to 54.8 percent in 2016. In 2020, our most recent presidential election, voter participation was the highest in more than a century at 62 percent (66.3 percent of the voting eligible population).

Why do you think this is? Do you see increased voter participation in your community?

12. How many of you, in the course of reading this book, looked into Louisiana’s laws surrounding felon disenfranchisement? What is the Louisiana law? Do you think the current Louisiana law is reasonable? Why or why not?