

RDI Essay Contest-Prompt #2

America's Broken Promise

This past 4th of July, millions of Americans celebrated their country's independence and the ideals of democracy, liberty, and equality upon which it was supposedly founded. But for many, this year's 4th of July felt different. The ongoing Black Lives Matter protests taking place across the country remind us that the democratic liberties guaranteed by our nation's founding words, "all men are created equal," have never been fully extended to Black Americans. Just as the Jim Crow laws of the 20th century denied African-Americans the right to vote, modern discriminatory practices like gerrymandering and voter suppression continue to act as a barrier to the realization of a fair democracy. Similarly, a racially biased criminal justice system has labeled millions of Black women and men as felons, denying them the right to vote in most states. Today, the struggle for racial justice in America remains inextricably linked to the ways in which our democracy is subverted, challenged, and undermined. If we are to realize our country's founding ideals of equality and liberty, we must first confront the systems that have prevented their actualization, and we must do so fearlessly.

Perhaps the foremost threat to racial equality in the United States is mass incarceration. While acts of racist police brutality may have been what ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, they represent only one facet of the complex and deeply institutionalized racism of the criminal justice system. The failed "War on Drugs," which targets low-income communities of color, and the criminalization of drug possession, in particular, are responsible for the disenfranchisement

of millions of people, voters who could potentially have a dramatic impact on local and national elections alike. In the 2000 presidential election, for example, the 600,000 formerly incarcerated residents of Florida likely would have tipped the election in favor of Al Gore had they been granted the right to vote.¹ Of course, official voter disenfranchisement is not the only means by which America's criminal justice system stifles Black and Latino Americans' access to democratic participation. Even in states that grant formerly incarcerated people the right to vote, a former prisoner seeking to exercise his or her right to cast a ballot will likely face cumbersome paperwork, fines, or court costs. As civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander argues in her book *The New Jim Crow*, "These bureaucratic minefields are the modern-day equivalent of poll taxes and literacy tests—'colorblind' rules designed to make voting a practical impossibility for a group defined largely by race."² In order to abolish these undemocratic barriers, there must be a coordinated effort to protect the voting rights of felons in all states, as well as a national awakening to the ways in which mass incarceration systematically discriminates against Black and brown Americans. Furthermore, advocates of racial justice must focus their energy on reforming our nation's justice system. Although there is a growing bipartisan consensus that mass incarceration is both discriminatory and inefficient, most legislation passed to address it has failed to confront the issue of race head-on. Until elected officials begin to face pressure from their constituents, Congress will likely continue to drag its feet.

¹ Gail Russell Chaddock, "U.S. Notches World's Highest Incarceration Rate," *Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 18, 2003.

² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: New Press, 2012), 198.

Outside of the criminal justice system, voter suppression and gerrymandering also prevent the civic participation of African-Americans and Hispanic and Latino Americans. Measures like requiring a photo ID to vote may sound “race-neutral” in theory, but in practice, they disproportionately hurt non-white voters. To take a fairly obvious example, Alabama—which has strict photo ID laws—announced a plan to deny driver’s licenses in counties with predominantly Black populations ahead of the 2016 election.³ Other electoral strategies, like gerrymandering and the closing of polling places, serve a similar purpose. In Texas, an analysis of polling sites found that areas with higher Black and Latino populations also saw increased closures.⁴ The prevailing belief among Americans that voting is universally guaranteed is simply false. Racially discriminatory voting laws have not disappeared, they have merely become less visible.

Finally, it should be noted that voter suppression and felon disenfranchisement are in no way the only obstacle to achieving racial justice in America. Voting, on its own, will not be enough to confront the centuries of systemic racism ingrained in our country’s schools, job markets, and law enforcement. However, we should not underestimate the ways in which our democracy has failed to include the voices of Black Americans. Just as there can be no true democracy without racial justice, reforming our elections and ending voter suppression once and for all could be the first step toward achieving a new era of racial equality in which our country finally lives up to its founding promise.

³ Editorial Board, “In Alabama, Federal Intervention Protects Minority Rights,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 7, 2017.

⁴ Richard Salame, “Texas Closes Hundreds of Polling Sites, Making It Harder for Minorities to Vote,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 2, 2020.