

punishment, states vary widely in the practice of disenfranchisement, demonstrating a critical federal interest for uniform standards.

Clarification of the law on restoration of ex-offender voting rights is a critical next step in criminal justice reform. In 2007, President George W. Bush signed the Second Chance Act into law, signaling a bipartisan awareness of the importance of enacting policies that assist in the reintegration of ex-offenders into their communities. Recent public opinion research has also shown that a significant majority of Americans favor voting rights for people on probation or parole, who are currently supervised in their communities, as well as for individuals who have completed their sentences. This legislation both captures the bipartisan spirit of the Bush administration and is consistent with evolving public opinion on rehabilitation of ex-offenders.

From a constitutional basis, the Democracy Restoration Act is a narrowly crafted effort to expand voting rights for people with felony convictions, while protecting state prerogatives to generally establish voting qualifications. The legislation would only apply to persons who are not in prison, and would only apply to federal elections. As such, our bill is fully consistent with constitutional requirements established by the Supreme Court in a series of decisions upholding federal voting rights laws.

Since the initial introduction of this legislation, the Sentencing Project reports 27 states have amended felony disenfranchisement policies in an effort to reduce their restrictiveness and expand voter eligibility. These reforms have resulted in an estimated more than 800,000 citizens regaining their voting rights. Yet, despite these reforms, the overall rate of ex-offender disenfranchisement has not abated and continues to have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. Many of the state reforms still rely on lengthy waiting periods or clemency and several feature burdensome procedural hurdles that have proven difficult to navigate for persons seeking to restore their voting rights. As a result, approximately 50 percent of the entire disenfranchised population is clustered in 12 states, with Florida alone accounting for 48 percent of the post-sentence population.

Proponents of ex-offender disenfranchisement have offered few justifications for continuing the practice. In fact, the strongest empirical research suggests that prohibitions on the right to vote undermine both our voting system and the fundamental rights of people with felony convictions. A series of studies make clear that civic engagement is pivotal in the transition from incarceration and discouraging repeat offenses. Disenfranchisement laws only serve to isolate and alienate ex-offenders, creating additional obstacles in their attempt to successfully put the past behind them by fully reintegrating into society. Unfortunately that is only half the story.

The current patchwork of state laws has created widespread confusion among election officials throughout the country and served as the justification for flawed voter purges. For example, although people with misdemeanor convictions never lose the right to vote in Ohio, in 2008, 30 percent of election officials in the state responded incorrectly or expressed uncertainty about whether individuals with misdemeanor convictions could vote. A similar survey by the Nebraska ACLU in advance of the 2016 general election determined

that about half of state election officials gave out the wrong information about former felons voting rights. Given the general confusion by election officials on restoration of voting rights, many ex-offenders are hesitant to even attempt registration, depriving eligible voters of their rights. Only federal law can conclusively resolve the ambiguities in this area plaguing our voting system.

In past Congresses, voting restoration legislation has been supported by a broad coalition of groups interested in voting and civil rights, including the NAACP, ACLU, Human Rights Watch, the Brennan Center for Justice, and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, among many others. This coalition has expanded to include many law enforcement groups including the American Probation and Parole Association, the Association of Paroling Authorities International, and the National Black Police Association, among others, who recognize that allowing people to vote after release from prison helps rebuild ties to the community that motivate law-abiding behavior.

The denial of voting rights by many states to ex-offenders represents a vestige from a time when suffrage was denied to whole classes of our population based on race, gender, religion, national origin and property. I believe that our nation fails not only people with felony convictions by denying them the right to vote, but the rest of our society that has struggled throughout its history to ensure that its citizenry be part of legitimate and inclusive elections. It is long overdue that these restrictions be relegated to unenlightened history.

RECOGNIZING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF MR. PAUL ELIZONDO

HON. JOAQUIN CASTRO

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, January 3, 2019

Mr. CASTRO of Texas. Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize the life and legacy of Mr. Paul Elizondo, who passed away on December 27, 2018. Mr. Elizondo was a fellow San Antonio resident and public servant who dedicated his life to others. He is survived by his wife, Irene, 3 sons and 3 granddaughters. He will be greatly missed.

Mr. Elizondo studied Music Education at St. Mary's University. In 1957, he joined the United States Marine Corps and served 2 years. A skilled saxophone player, he carried an appreciation for music throughout his life. For 14 years, Mr. Elizondo taught music at the San Antonio and Edgewood Independent School Districts. He was Director of the Paul Elizondo Orchestra for 50 years. His orchestra was enjoyed by the community for many years.

Mr. Elizondo was a meaningful force for progress in our community. In 1978, Mr. Elizondo was elected to the Texas House of Representatives where he served two terms and was a member of the House Committee on State Affairs and the House Committee on Public Education. In 1982, he was first elected to the Bexar County Commissioners Court, later being elected to serve an unprecedented 10th term as Commissioner for Precinct 2, making him the longest serving member of the five-person Commissioners Court.

Mr. Elizondo was known as a no-nonsense individual whose commitment to policy was

only matched by his strong sense of humor. He led incremental health care and criminal justice programs. He was strong advocate for mental health services throughout the county. He was instrumental in major infrastructure and safety projects such as the Bexar County flood control program. Mr. Elizondo's presence in the community extended beyond the Court. Notably, he assisted in bringing critical development to the Westside of San Antonio.

To many, Mr. Elizondo was considered a mentor who dedicated over 30 years to public service. His institutional recollection of many county matters will be sorely missed. Bexar County was well served by Commissioner Paul Elizondo.

I am proud to have known this great individual. The passing of Mr. Paul Elizondo has been greatly felt throughout our community. However, I am confident that his impact will last for many years to come.

INTRODUCTION OF THE NEWBORN ACT

HON. STEVE COHEN

OF TENNESSEE

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, January 3, 2019

Mr. COHEN. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of the Nationally Enhancing the Wellbeing of Babies through Outreach and Research Now (NEWBORN) Act, a bill I introduced today.

In 2016, Tennessee had almost 600 children die before their first birthday, including over 120 in Shelby County. Shelby County's infant mortality rate was 9.3 per 1,000 live births, which was a 13 percent increase over 2015 and significantly higher than both Tennessee's rate of 7.4 percent and the national rate of 5.9 percent.

In the United States, our infant mortality rate is comparable to countries like Bosnia, Chile, and Cuba, and an American child is 76 percent more likely to die before their first birthday in America than in 19 other wealthy nations, including Australia, Canada, France, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Even more concerning is the racial and ethnic infant mortality disparities that continue to exist. In 2016, the rates for infant mortality was nearly double for African American infants compared to white infants in Tennessee.

This is unacceptable. That's why I am introducing the NEWBORN Act.

If enacted, the NEWBORN Act would create infant mortality-focused pilot programs in the highest-risk areas of the country.

The pilot programs would focus on addressing one or more of the top five reasons for infant mortality: birth defects, preterm birth and low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome, maternal pregnancy complications, and injuries to the infant.

The NEWBORN Act would specifically encourage the development of community-specific practices to promote pre-natal care and community outreach and education.

The current infant mortality rates are tragic, but good practices can improve health and save lives.

I urge my colleagues to help pass this bill.