

5 Steps You Can Take Before the Election to Promote Criminal Justice Reform

The criminal justice system is overdue for a major overhaul. In the long-term, we need to address systemic issues of racism and classism, and tackle issues relating to police violence, cash bail, mass incarceration, crisis intervention, funding for the addicted and mentally ill, police and prosecutor accountability, drug sentences and policies, and wrongful convictions, to name only a few.

But many of you want to know what you can do **right now** in the weeks leading up to the election to promote meaningful change. Here are **five steps** you can take today to advance criminal justice reform before the November 3rd election.

1. Work to Elect a Progressive Prosecutor

The Issue:

Prosecutors have tremendous power in the criminal justice system. Progressive prosecutors can decide to not prosecute whole categories of cases, such as marijuana and other low-level offenses. They can support bail reform and decarceration efforts. They can effectively hold police accountable for misconduct. In other words, the person who leads your local prosecutor office matters.

What you can do now:

Find out whether you live in a jurisdiction where a progressive prosecutor is running for election by going [here](#) and [here](#). Then do everything in your power to get them elected. Prosecutor races so often fall under the radar, but electing a change-oriented prosecutor is a direct and powerful way to promote criminal justice reform in your community.

2. Invest in Voting Rights for All

The Issue:

In 2018, Florida voters passed a state constitutional amendment that restored voting rights to people with felony convictions – many of whom are black and brown – upon their release from parole or probation.

Before that bill was signed into law, however, Republican Florida Governor Ron deSantis and the state Republican Congress added a requirement that people with felony convictions [pay outstanding court fines and fees](#) – sometimes totaling thousands of dollars – before their voting rights could be restored.

This requirement was an end-run around the Florida electorate because it created [huge obstacles](#) for poor people with felony convictions to vote. The Republican poll tax was no accident: many of the people disenfranchised by these rules come from Democratic-leaning communities.

What you can do right now:

The [Florida Rights Restoration Coalition](#) has been raising money to pay off the fines and fees for people too poor to do so. Mayor Bloomberg has joined the FRRC effort, raising \$16 million dollars toward the cause. Once the fines and fees are paid, formerly disenfranchised people will be able to vote in this historic election. Can you support the FRRC in their fight for voting rights?

3. Fund Bail Projects and Support Bail Reform

The Issue:

Far too many poor people and people of color are sitting in our nation's jails (about [500,000 people](#) are currently in pretrial detention), often because they cannot afford to pay even modest amounts of bail. And although people in jail for pretrial detention often are [legally allowed](#) to vote, there are serious obstacles that prevent them from doing so. These barriers to voting reflect a lack of knowledge by the people in charge of jails and by the people incarcerated about how voting rights actually work.

What you can do now:

While ending cash bail should be a long-term goal, action needs to be taken right now to protect voting rights for those people in pretrial detention who retain the right to vote. You can support organizations that seek to protect voting rights in jails like the Ordinary People Society's "[Release the Jail Vote Campaign](#)."

Or even more directly: work to get people out of jail before the election. Urge your local officials to use their emergency powers to immediately release people who are being held pretrial because they can't make bail and who otherwise pose no threat to society. Then help make sure they are registered to vote before your state's registration deadlines.

Reducing jail populations before the election has an added benefit: it will protect you and your community. Jails are breeding grounds for COVID-19, which can spread through the prison population and then to the correctional staff, who in turn bring the coronavirus back to the community. The less people in jail right now, the safer we are.

Let's promote the right to vote while keeping our communities safe by releasing people held in pre-trial detention.

4. Tell Your Federal Representatives to Stop the Killing Spree

The Issue:

Before this summer, the federal government had not executed anyone on federal death row since 2003. With just weeks to go before the Republican convention and months until the election, President Trump's Department of Justice has gone on an unprecedented killing spree – executing [seven people](#) (as of the time of this writing) in just two months.

What you can do now:

Contact your federal representatives and tell them to stop federal executions. They are racist, classist and hurt our global standing, particularly since nearly every one of our international partners has ended their use of the death penalty. And, importantly, executions do not make us safer.

Life and death decisions should not turn on whims and electoral politics. Tell your federal representatives “enough” and urge them to put on a hold on federal executions.

5. Vote. Vote Early. And Tell Everyone You Know to Do the Same.

The Issue:

Joe Biden has set out a detailed [criminal justice reform platform](#). If you haven't read it yet, you should. He supports decriminalizing marijuana offenses, releasing people with drug use convictions, bail reform, ending the death penalty, and a whole lot more. Donald Trump, on the other hand, uses [racist rhetoric](#) to appeal to his base, [ended federal investigations](#) into local and state police departments accused of misconduct, and has bent over backwards to paint himself as a “law and order” leader.

What you can do now:

The choice is clear. If you want criminal justice reform, vote for Biden-Harris. Vote for Democratic senators and congresspersons.

And *when* you vote matters.

If you are planning to vote by mail, do it. Today.

If you are planning to vote early, do it. Now.

If you prefer to vote in person on election day, then mask up and head to the polls.¹

But whatever you do, and however you do it, vote.

¹ Before you go to the polls, check to see whether your state's election procedures have been impacted by the coronavirus. In New Jersey, for example, because of the pandemic, all eligible voters were sent a ballot in the mail. If a New Jersey voter chooses to vote at the polls this year, they will only be able to cast a provisional ballot — which takes time to be reconciled and counted. In New Jersey, if a voter wants their vote to be counted on or by November 3rd, they should vote as soon as possible by mail or by dropping their ballot in an official ballot box.

In the next few weeks, I'll be doubling down on the action items above because I believe they will promote local change, increase voting access, and foster a vision of a more fair and just society. I'd love to hear what you think of this action list, and what other action items you might add.

Together our voices will help make – and keep – criminal justice reform as a national priority today and through the election.

Visit my website for more on Criminal Justice Reform, jessicahenryjustice.com.