

# States looking at ex-felon voter rights

By Lorinda M. Bullock  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - In 2004, Republican candidate George W. Bush won the presidential election for a second term, beating Democratic candidate John Kerry by about 3 million popular votes. An even larger number of Americans — 5.3 million — cannot legally vote because they are ex-convicts on probation, parole or have completed their sentences.

Depending on how they would vote, if given the opportunity, that group alone could have changed the outcome of the election. Even if the outcome remained the

same in 2004, or if Kerry became the leader of the free world, Ryan King, author of "Decade of Reform: Felony Disenfranchisement Policy in the United States," believes those 5 million additional voices would have had an enormous impact on many political races, regardless of whether they were national or local.

"The fact of the matter is there are 7 million people in this country that are under correctional supervision and it is an extremely diverse population of people," King said.

"It has become, in many ways, a very politically di-

verse community. These are people who — in the surveys that have been done — care about the exact same issues that you and I care about, whether it's the 'War on Terror' (or) whether it's tax rates. These are people that have the same sort of desires and concerns as everyone else."

A new report about the growing acceptance of ex-felon voting rights was released last week by the Sentencing Project, a criminal justice organization based in Washington, D.C., where King is a policy analyst. The study examines the last 10 years of felony voting rights reform and reveals that indi-

vidual state governments are becoming more receptive to extending voting rights to ex-offenders.

"The 10-year trend shows 16 states have expanded voting access to people with felony records reforms ranging from repealing lifetime bans to easing the restoration process. More than 600,000 people in seven states have regained their voting rights in 10 years," said the study.

King says Florida, Kentucky and Virginia are among the states least willing to relax their felony voting laws.

"They have the most restrictive laws and the most difficult restoration process — essentially lifetime disenfranchisement," he said.

King said even states that have complex voting restoration systems, such as Tennessee, (that had lifetime disenfranchisement for ex-offenders) and Alabama, have become more flexible.

The study also showed that of all the ethnic groups affected by disenfranchisement and the criminal justice system, African-Americans are hit the hardest.

"One in 12 African-

Americans is disenfranchised because of convictions — five times the rate of non-African-Americans," King said.

The study also explains that voting power in African-American and poor communities has been diluted by the disproportionate high rates of people from those communities — particularly Black men — becoming ensnarled in the correctional system.

"Thirteen percent of Black men are disenfranchised, and as many as 40 percent of Black men are projected to lose their right to vote in states that disenfranchise ex-offenders," said the study.

Laleh Ispahani, a senior policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, agrees that minority communities are crippled by high incarceration rates.

"When you look at the fact that all these people are drawn from a few communities, you also have to understand the people who remain in those communities are hurt by this too because their own voting power is accordingly diluted. So they can't vote as

a bloc and actually get anything done to improve their own lot, their own condition," she said.

While a number of states are wrangling with the issue, this November, Rhode Island voters will decide if ex-offenders should be allowed to cast their ballots.

King said interest in felony voting rights has been mounting over the years and reflect public opinion polls showing that 80 percent of the American public believes ex-offenders should have the right to vote upon the completion of their sentences.

"It's all over the place. It's regionally diverse, it's politically diverse, a number of these states have Republican governors that have signed bills as well as Democratic, so we've seen bipartisan support for reform we've seen everything from some states repealing lifetime voting prohibition to other states modifying procedures of restoration and everything in between," he said.

In this year alone, the study said 73 bills on felony (See Ex-Felons, Page 19)

## Volunteering

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Still, the report finds a growing trend of "episodic" volunteering, in which students participate in different projects but devote less than two weeks at a time to each, rather than regularly contributing to one project or organization.

Episodic volunteering may also have been boosted by the more-than 200,000 college students, many of them giving up fall and spring breaks, who volunteered to help rebuild the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

"I do think college kids are given a bad rap," said Katie Franck, a senior at Elon University in North Carolina who traveled to the Gulf Coast on her fall break,

and coordinates an after school mentoring program at Elon that is rapidly expanding. "When they're given the opportunities and it's facilitated the right way, they're willing to donate a lot of time and energy to others."

On Tuesday, Elon will be one of three institutions to receive the first-ever President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll awards for general community service. The other winners are California State University, Monterey Bay and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

Louisiana State, Tulane and Jackson State will receive awards for their hurricane relief efforts.

Among the report's other

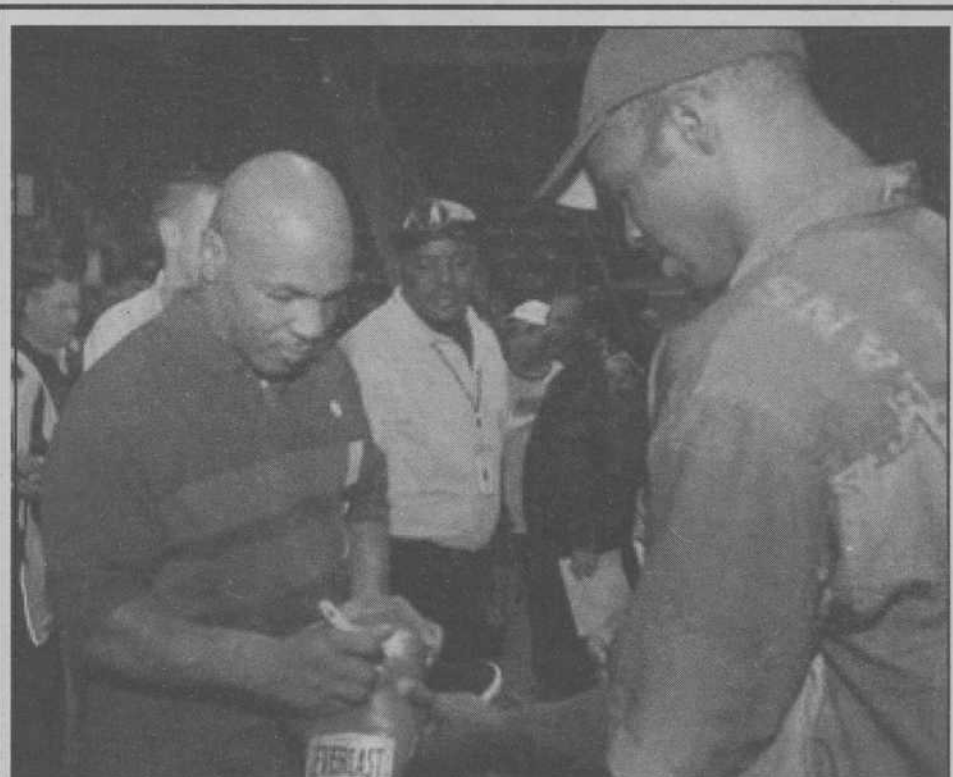
findings:

— Thirty-three percent of female college students volunteer, compared to 26.8 percent of males.

— Among volunteers, tutoring (26.6 percent) and mentoring (23.8 percent) are the most common activities. White students are more likely to volunteer than Blacks (32 percent to 24.1 percent), but Black students who volunteer are more likely to be tutors or mentors.

— Students who work part-time (1-15 hours per week) volunteer at higher rates than students who don't have jobs.

-- About 23 percent of college student volunteers serve with religious organizations, compared to about 35 percent of volunteers overall.



### TYSON PENS PAGE

Former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson (left) signs a boxing glove belonging to Zack Page following Tyson's press conference held on Wednesday in Youngstown, Ohio. Page is on the same fight card with Tyson.

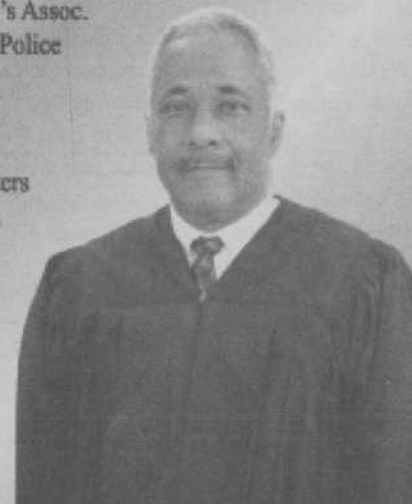
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"I would appreciate your vote in the upcoming election."  
- Michael Douglas

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