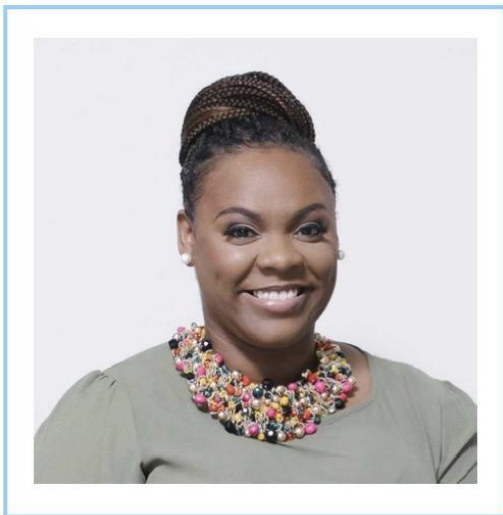


2021 LEGISLATIVE REPORT





Dear Friends,

On behalf of Mississippi Votes, I'd like to thank you for your continued support of our sacred work over the last three years. Since inception, our team has strived to provide top-tier, concise information on all aspects of the electoral landscape in Mississippi. We developed this report to provide an in-depth analysis of the 2021 legislative session. Our report is an attempt to provide readers with an

educational overview of the legislative process as it relates to voting rights policies and proposals.

The mission of our Policy and Research program is to create a voter friendly Mississippi. Our Policy and Research Team works tirelessly to provide citizens with research-based policy suggestions that would break down the barriers that keep people from the polls. To achieve this, our advocacy's strategic plan is divided into multiple stages that begin with community based research.

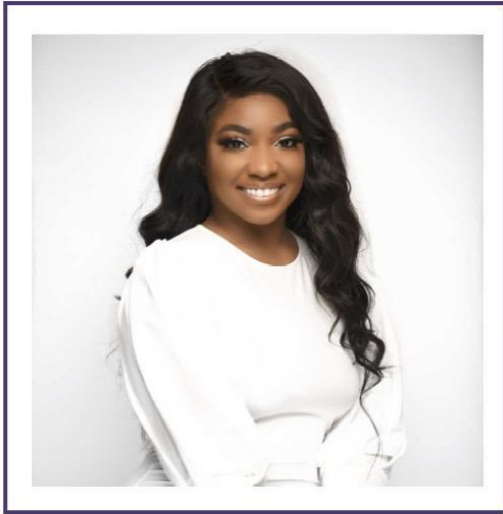
We believe that our model aids in increased civic participation beyond election day. Our research shows that easier access to the polls, a deep understanding of the legislative process, and education around voting laws and policies will encourage all voters - frequent, new, and potential- to take greater responsibility for their civic duties.

Through our continued educational efforts like our Legislative Advocacy Days and Democracy Classes, Mississippians are afforded the opportunity to take the lead in our work -- the very work that affects each of our lives!

It is our hope that readers take a deep look at this report, become involved with the work of MS Votes, and see themselves as part of the larger picture for how we make our democracy work for all of us during our lifetime.

In Solidarity,

Arekia S. Bennett
Executive Director



Dear Reader,

As the Policy & Research Analyst for Mississippi Votes and a lifelong Mississippian, I know firsthand that good information about our electoral and legislative process is hard to find. In my role, it has been my responsibility to understand and interpret laws regarding those processes and ensure that every Mississippian is involved deeply in those processes. Over the last three years, Mississippi Votes has been tracking all election policies and legislation that shapes Mississippi's electoral practices.

This report is a comprehensive accumulation of our findings from the 2021 Legislative Session; an in-depth view of the policies as well as solutions to drive us toward the voter friendly state we know Mississippi has the potential to become.

We hope that this report will give some insight into how Mississippians can be a more active voice in the legislative process.

Mississippi Votes will continue to educate Mississippians on how their voice matters beyond the ballot.

Hannah Burnell Williams
Policy and Research Analyst

ABOUT US

MISSION

Mississippi Votes is an organization of intergenerational synergy centering and led by young people invested in the progression of Mississippi. We do this through our programming and outreach strategies that collectively empower young people, encourage civic engagement, and educate communities on voting rights through place-based grassroots organizing.



OUR VISION

Our vision is to cultivate a culture of civic engagement throughout the state of Mississippi.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER TO THE READER..... 2

ABOUT US..... 4

PURPOSE..... 6

HOW BILL BECOMES A LAW..... 7

DEFINITIONS..... 8

VOTER ACCESSIBILITY.....8

VOTER MOBILIZATION.....8

VOTER SUFFRAGE.....8

VOTER FRIENDLY.....8

VOTER UNFRIENDLY.....8

MISSISSIPPI VOTES' LEGISLATIVE STANDARDS..... 9

BILLS & LEGISLATORS..... 10

TOP VOTER UNFRIENDLY/FRIENDLY BILLS.....11

KEY BILLS WE FOLLOWED..... 13

VOTER FRIENDLY CHAMPIONS..17

SB 2588 + HB 4..... 18

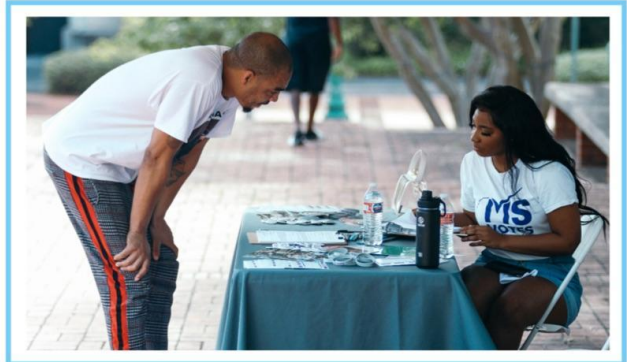
OUR VOICES, OUR VOTE..... 19

QUOTES FROM IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS..20

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY..... 21

STRATEGY..... 22

ABOUT THE AUTHORS..... 23



PURPOSE

Since inception, Mississippi Votes' Policy and Research team has monitored the Mississippi State Legislature alongside proposals, legislation, and bills about voting. As an organization that strongly believes in a "Voter Friendly" Mississippi, we put forth an agenda each legislative session to address the barriers of our antiquated voting process in the Magnolia State. These barriers include policies and practices that hinder turnout and discourage participation. These facts make Mississippi one of the least "Voter-Friendly" states in the United States. The purpose of the Mississippi Votes' Advocacy Plan is to break down the barriers that keep citizens from the polls by doing extensive research on voting policy and providing the public with both the knowledge and the means to advocate for healthy voting policies.

During the 2021 Mississippi Legislative session, Mississippi Votes monitored legislation closely and worked tirelessly with State Legislators to combat regressive proposals and advocate for processes that would expand civic participation. The 2021 Legislative session was like none other as there were a record amount of bills that would taint our already dated and inequitable voting policies. This document serves as an overall summation of Mississippi Votes' research, an understanding of this legislative session, and an overview of the ways state elected leaders voted on issues regarding elections and voting rights.



HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

1. The Bill is filed and sent to committee

No bill can become an act until it has been read on three separate days in each house. The first reading occurs when the bill is first introduced. Reference to committee immediately follows the first reading.

2. The committee considers the bill

The committees of each house meet and consider the bills that have been referred to them, which is the second reading. Committee members vote to approve the bill, amend it, or deny it. Bills not favorably reported are typically dead.

3. The bill is debated on the floor

Bills are listed on the calendar in the order they are reported by committee. When the bill is reached on the calendar, the bill gets its third reading. At this time, the whole house studies, debates, and amends the bill. Separate votes are taken on each amendment or change to the bill.

4. They VOTE

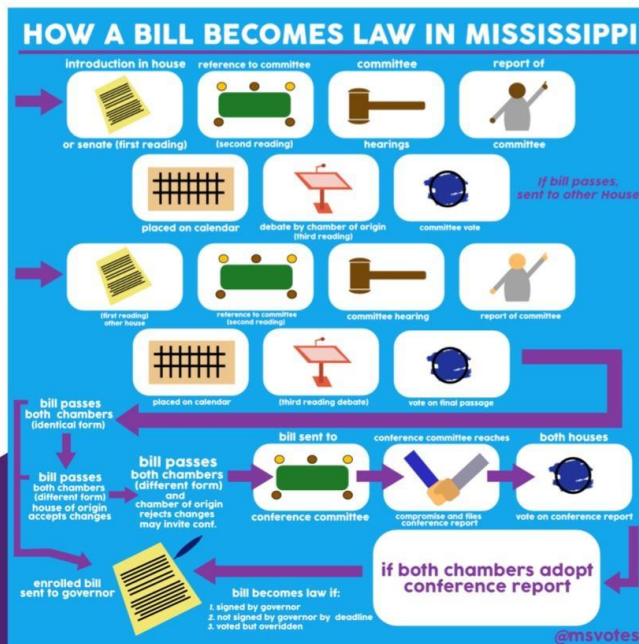
After the bill has been debated, each member votes. If a 51% majority of those present vote in favor of the bill, it passes. Otherwise, it fails.

5. Repeats steps 1-4 in the other chamber

If the second house makes changes to the bill, the bill is sent back to the house of origin for consideration of the amendment. If both chambers pass identical versions of the same bill, it goes to the Governor's desk. If the second house does not approve it in committee or it is not considered by the full house, then the bill is dead. If the bill passes in both houses but in different forms, the house of origin must accept those changes before it goes to the Governor's desk. If the bill passes but in different forms, the house of origin must accept those changes before it goes to the Governor's desk. If the bill passes but in different forms and the house of origin rejects changes, then the bill is sent to a committee.

6. The Governor decides to sign or veto the bill

When the Governor signs the bill, it completes its enactment into law. If the Governor disapproves, it can be vetoed and returned to the originating house for consideration. The legislature can override a veto with a simple majority (51%) vote. A bill can also become law if it is sent to the Governor but is not signed by the deadline.



DEFINITIONS

The following are issue areas that incorporate the fundamental beliefs of Mississippi Votes' and prioritize the voices and experiences of the young people native to our state. Below are definitions that will be used often throughout this report.

VOTER ACCESSIBILITY - the process in which individuals have fair and adequate access to the voting process. A restriction in voter access could include a voter roll purge, voter I.D requirements, lack of polling places or updated machinery, and methods of which absentee ballots are requested and received are all variants of voter accessibility issues in the state of Mississippi. The state also has no vote by mail practices, strict early voting requirements, and also lacks other voter accessibility tools like ballot drop-off boxes or curbside voting. Mississippi Votes believes voting should be easy and accessible to all Mississippians whether they live on a college campus or in a rural area.

VOTER MODERNIZATION- the process of updating the current voting and voter registration processes. Mississippi residents do not have access to online voter registration and automatic voter registration tactics are few and far between. By making voter registration available online, it will capture the attention and usage of the 18 - 21 year old population. Mississippi's current voter registration process is to complete the voter registration form on paper and either mailing or delivering the form to the circuit clerk's office in the county in which the citizen lives. Mississippi's Automatic Voter Registration process is currently only used at DMVs, and the service is poorly advertised as an option when getting a new Driver's License or State I.D. Mississippi Votes believes that Mississippi should implement Automatic Voter Registration at every state government agency. Automatic - specifically Backend Automatic Voter Registration- leaves no room for human error and facilitates a seamless process for everyone involved.

VOTER SUFFRAGE - the process of obtaining voting rights as a United States citizen. Ordinarily, a citizen can register to vote at 17 and a half and cast their first ballot during the first election after their 18th birthday. However, in Mississippi, persons convicted of any of the state's 23 Disenfranchising Crimes permanently lose their voting rights unless they are restored in one of two ways: a.) full pardon by the Governor or b.) Legislative Suffrage Bill passage. A person seeking to regain their voting rights stands a very slim chance of either of these two options working in their favor. Mississippi Votes believes that all impacted persons who have gone to prison or jail, entirely served their terms, and have finished their probation or rehabilitation programs should be automatically eligible for complete restoration of voting rights without having to jump through hoops.

VOTER FRIENDLY - generally describes a bill, a process, or a practice that allows the opportunity for voting access to be expanded and more accessible to every eligible voter.

VOTER UNFRIENDLY - generally describes a bill, a process, or a practice, that threatens or restricts voting access and its expansion to every eligible voter.



MISSISSIPPI VOTES' LEGISLATIVE STANDARDS

Mississippi Votes asks the following questions to determine whether or not a bill is considered voter friendly:

1. Does this bill help or hinder individuals that are at high risk of disenfranchisement? (citizens in rural areas, black and brown citizens, poor citizens, college students)
2. Does this bill make it harder or easier for individuals to have access to polling places. (polling locations changes or restrictions)
3. Does this bill hinder or help voters cast their ballot? (voter ID changes, acceptable forms of voter ID, accessibility to affidavit ballots, and absentee voting)
4. Does this bill make it easier or harder for college students to be involved with the electoral process? (access to absentee voting, voter ID, access to voter registration)
5. Does this bill expand or restrict access to current voters? (voter purging)
6. Does this bill make it harder or easier for citizens to register to vote? (voter modernization, online voter registration, automatic voter registration)
7. Does this bill include relief to those who have been felony disenfranchised? (the restoration of voting rights, outlines clear voting rights restoration process, updates the voting rights restoration process)
8. Is this bill helpful or harmful to the intended structure of democracy in the state of Mississippi? (limits the voice of residents of the state of Mississippi)
9. Will this bill create legislation that provides for a more equitable and equal Mississippi?
10. Will this bill create legislation that provides for a more progressive and forward moving Mississippi?

BILLS AND LEGISLATORS

HB 4



REP. SUMMERS

SB 2588



SEN. TATE

SB 2118



REP. BECKETT

HB 349



SEN. FILLINGANE

HB 586



SEN. BLOUNT

TOP VOTER UNFRIENDLY BILLS

SB 2588



VOTER FRIENDLY



VOTER UNFRIENDLY

Remove electors who fail to respond to notice.

HB 4



VOTER FRIENDLY



VOTER UNFRIENDLY

Remove voters who fail to respond to notice and who fail to vote after a certain period of time.

SB 2014



VOTER FRIENDLY



VOTER UNFRIENDLY

Reduce length of time within which certain persons must present proper voter ID or execute religious exemption.

HB 195



VOTER FRIENDLY



VOTER UNFRIENDLY

Authorize those of certain size to conduct special elections at one polling place.

HB 543



VOTER FRIENDLY



VOTER UNFRIENDLY

Clarify that only Mississippi driver's license shall be acceptable license.

TOP VOTER FRIENDLY BILLS

HB 217



Online voter registration for the first time voters.

SB 2118



Mississippi Student Absentee Voter Act (revise absentee process and requirements for college students)

HB 521



Provide for restoration upon completion of sentence or placement on probation.

SB 2562



Authorize early voting for 20 days before the election.

HB 349



No-excuse absentee voting; authorize for any qualified voter who votes in person at the office of the registrar.

KEY BILLS WE FOLLOWED:

HOUSE BILL 4

Summary: Statewide Elections Management System; remove voters who fail to respond to notice and who fail to vote after a certain period of time. Its purpose is to purge voters from the voter rolls and it is disguised as just a means of dropping people who have moved or died but we already have laws for that. We have seen similar language in other states and as a result, it disproportionately targets minority and low-income communities as well as young qualified voters.

HOUSE BILL 349

Summary: No-excuse absentee voting for any qualified voter who votes in person at the office of the registrar. All absentee votes cast in person at the office of the registrar shall be cast on either a direct recording electronic voting system or using an optical mark reading equipment machine unless the registrar determines that those methods would be too expensive or inefficient, in which case absentee paper ballots may be used.

KEY BILLS WE FOLLOWED:

HOUSE BILL 586

Summary: Statewide Elections Management System; compare to certain identification databases to ensure non-U.S. citizens are not registered to vote. The right to vote is the most precious and necessary element of this country's democracy, but excessive barriers and administrative hurdles make it increasingly difficult for every American citizen to exercise this right. With one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country, Mississippi is a state in need of reforms to encourage eligible voters to register, not block them from doing so. Without any supporting evidence or positive precedent, HB 586 promises only to impose unnecessary, unsustainable, and unconstitutional costs on both voters and administrative agencies.

SENATE BILL 2588

Summary: Statewide Elections Management System; remove electors who fail to respond to notice. SB 2588 mandates voter purges based on that voter's response to a "confirmation notice" sent via mail. The confirmation notice must be sent to the voter's address on file if they have not voted once in 2 years. It is disguised as just a means of dropping people who have moved or died but we already have laws for that. We have seen similar language in other states and as a result, it disproportionately targets minority and low-income communities as well as young qualified voters.

KEY BILLS WE FOLLOWED:

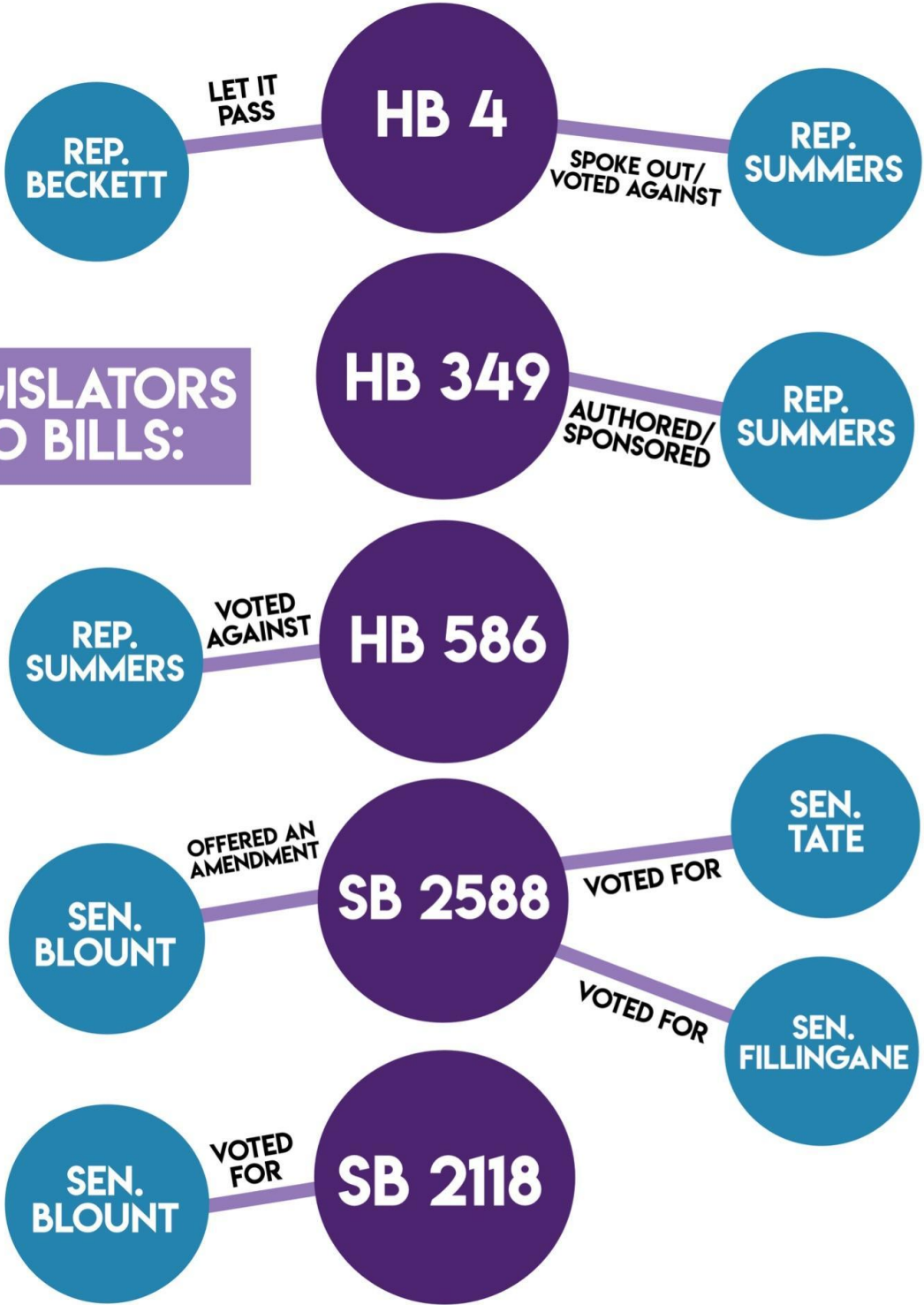


SENATE BILL 2118

Summary: A bill to establish the Mississippi Student Absentee Voter Act. It provides that Mississippi citizens who reside outside the county or municipality of their residence because of their enrollment at an institution of higher learning may request and receive an absent elector's ballot. It also provides that a request for an absentee ballot shall serve as a request for an absentee ballot for each election held within the calendar year for which the voter is eligible to vote. It authorizes the use of electronic facsimile devices, postal mail and electronic mail to transmit absentee ballots, to receive voted absentee ballots and to receive completed Mississippi postcard applications under the Student Absentee Voter Act.

* BILLS WE ADVOCATED FOR

**LEGISLATORS
TO BILLS:**



VOTER FRIENDLY CHAMPIONS

Representative Zakiya Summers and Senator David Blount are great examples of Voter Friendly Champions. Both actively supported all efforts to expand access to the ballot box for all citizens and modernize our election systems. They consistently prioritized young people and the mission of our organization.

Rep. Summers sponsored 5 Election Bills around online voter registration, early voting, and no-excuse absentee. (HB 217, HB 345, HB 348, HB 349, HB 894) She also sponsored 6 Suffrage Bills and all of which passed through the House Judiciary B Committee. (HB1517, HB1518, HB1519, HB1523, HB1524, HB1525) Rep. Summers is on record speaking out about these issues inside her committee, on the House Floor, and in news/media.

Senator David Blount sponsored 4 Election Bills around electronic application procedures for college students, online voter registrations, and allowing felons to vote upon meeting certain conditions. (SB2102, SB2140, SB2571, SC 508) Senator Blount became most helpful during the session when speaking out against harmful voter purging legislation such as SB 2588. He knew that the Senate chamber did not have the votes to kill the bill, but he worked overtime to make the bill "less bad" by proposing bi-partisan amendments.

SB 2588 + HB 4

During the 2021 legislative session, some very harmful voter purging bills were proposed and made it far into the legislative process. Senate Bill 2588 was sponsored by the Chair of the Senate Elections Committee, Senator Jeff Tate. It issued a mandate that would purge hundreds of voters across the state based on that voter's response to a "confirmation notice" sent to their mailbox. The determining factor on who would be sent one of these confirmation postcards is whether or not that voter had cast a ballot in 2 years. The issue is not that irregular voters exist but that they may be part of communities that are at risk. Many rural, minority and low-income citizens may not have adequate access to a home mailing address. A lot of rural places rely on P.O. boxes in place of a home address. This bill was argued to simply remove voters who have moved or passed away, but Mississippi already has laws that address both of those issues. While Senator David Blount disagreed with the idea of purging voters simply because they pick and choose which elections they want to participate in, he offered an amendment to expand the amount of time a person must be an inactive voter and also extend the time in which one has to respond to the postcard.

Similarly, House Bill 4 aimed to accomplish the same outcome as SB 2588, purging the Mississippi voter rolls of "inactive" voters. HB 4 was sponsored by Representative Brent Powell. Frequently, mirroring bills are produced in both chambers to heighten the chances of them getting passed. Fortunately for all Mississippians, neither one of these bills made it past their final phase rendering them both dead.

Since 2013, the Voting Rights Act has been under attack in terms of genuinely protecting voters from voter suppression. Following the 2020 presidential election, many states have reacted by trying to make voting harder for their citizens. Mississippi is no exception. The historical implications of voter suppression in the deep south have left many of its residents with generational traumas connected to voting. It cannot be ignored that state governments have intentionally left out rural, poor white, and black folks from political conversations on purpose since the inception of this nation. The importance of keeping all electoral processes fair, free and safe is a valid concern. However, bold decisions without proper enforcement is not the proper way to ensure that voters will be protected. An aggressive voter purging effort can disenfranchise many eligible and previously registered voters who might not find out they have been purged until Election Day. In a state where same-day registration is not allowed, that is not a risk voters can afford to take.

"OUR VOICES, OUR VOTE"

Mississippi Votes partnered with One Voice and Advancement Project to produce a report centered on the firsthand struggles of those seeking to obtain their voting rights after a past felony conviction. In this state, Mississippi has 23 disenfranchising crimes that permanently bar one from participating in all electoral processes. In the report, persons who these laws have directly impacted share their stories on how their life has changed significantly after re-entering society. Mississippi Votes and One Voice also submitted applications for suffrage on behalf of the impacted people our work is centered around. The Mississippi Legislature did not pass a single applicant. Legislators failed to give adequate reasoning as to why many of these first-time, non-violent offenders were not given their rights to vote back after living years as model citizens.

LEARN MORE AT:
[HTTPS://RESTORETHEVOTEMS.COM](https://RESTORETHEVOTEMS.COM)

235,152

Mississippians are disenfranchised, nearly 11% of the state's population.

62%

of Mississippians incarcerated, on parole, or probation are Black.



QUOTES FROM IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS

"The system did not prepare me for coming home. The system is not designed for people to come back. A person is in there so long and gets adapted to that environment so by the time you are released, the world has changed." - **Jarvis Hibbler**



"Finding employment has been the worst thing for me. I have had jobs that I have worked and once my background check came in, I was released from my job. I just don't understand why the charge that I caught in 2009 and it is 2020 and the work industry is still holding that against me. So, nine out of ten people are going to go back to prison because they are going to do the same thing that landed them in prison in the first place."

- **Jermaine Wellington**



Mississippi Votes, One Voice, and Advancement Project aim to continue to fight for the restoration of voting rights for impacted individuals and hold our legislators accountable for ways to make the voter suffrage process more straightforward and successful. Read the report.

<https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MS-Reentry-Report24.pdf>

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

During the 2021 Legislative Session, Mississippi Votes remain diligent in our mission to protect the voting rights of Mississippians across the state. We voiced our concern and disapproval of SB 2588 and HB 4, two very potentially damaging voter purging bills. We also stood behind legislation that we supported, like SB 2118 or the Mississippi Student Absentee Voter Act, which aimed to make the absentee voting process easier for college students. We also stood in defense of protesters everywhere when HB 83, an anti-protest bill with unimaginable regulations, was introduced. We engaged in calling, texting, posting on social media, and emailing our support base (with the help of our students and volunteers) to take action by expressing their disdain for specific bills to their legislators. We also created advocacy toolkits with everything one needed to engage in the this process. For a complete list of bills monitored by the organization, [click here](#).

In addition to teaming up with One Voice and Advancement Project to release a report around first-hand experiences involving the restoring of voting rights, MS Votes and One Voice also hosted a press conference in which impacted persons were able to share their stories of how frustrating the loss of their suffrage is. We held a dinner that included legislators, impacted persons, and advocates who met to discuss the changes that need to happen around voter suffrage. In total, twenty-one bills of suffrage were introduced to the legislature. Only two of them passed and neither of the applicants were ones submitted by One Voice or MS Votes.

Mississippi Votes will continue to fight for an equal and equitable voting experience for ALL Mississippians.



STRATEGY

The Policy and Research team undergoes several stages each year in preparation for the legislative session. At the beginning of May, we begin to do preliminary research on the central policies we will advocate for as an organization. We collect quantitative and qualitative data to help guide our understanding of voter registration, voter turnout, and other measures of civic engagement in Mississippi. We compare data to the year prior and assess what is possible for the years to come. After gathering all the data and doing the necessary research, we analyze current law and state legislation to create a proposal. Our partners are integral in this process as we discuss potential policy proposals based on their impact on voter registration, turnout, and civic engagement. Once policy recommendations are finalized internally, we share our policy proposal with legislators and our supporters.

Mississippi Votes stuck to its core principles around voter education this year. The Policy and Research Team held a series of virtual Legislative Advocacy Days for students and community members that featured conversations with legislators and other stakeholders. These conversations were centered around how to effectively get involved with the Mississippi legislature and what everyday people can do to spread awareness about good and bad bills. They also covered how to find your legislators' contact information, navigate the Mississippi Legislature website, watch committee meetings on youtube, and track bills in real-time. We were able to engage all ages of Mississippians across the state through these information sessions.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HANNAH WILLIAMS, POLICY AND RESEARCH ANALYST

Hannah Burnell Williams is a 28-year-old native of Jackson, Mississippi and a 2016 graduate of Jackson State University where she received a B.A. in History. She is currently attending Harvard University Extension School for a master's in Museum Studies. Hannah joined the Mississippi Votes team in 2019 as the Policy and Research Analyst where she leads the work in voting reform for pre-trial detainees and the restoration of rights for the felony disenfranchised. She also organizes student and community interaction with the Mississippi Legislature and directs the One Girl, One Vote fellowship.

JARRIUS ADAMS, ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH COORDINATOR

Jarius Adams is a 23-year-old native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi and a 2019 graduate of the University of Mississippi where he received his B.A. in Public Policy and Political Science. Jarius joined the MS Votes team in January of 2021. He serves as the Advocacy and Outreach Coordinator. During his time with the organization he has worked on advocacy focused on online voter registration, electronic absentee voting, voter suffrage & rights restoration for the formerly incarcerated alongside the legislature.

TIMOTHY YOUNG, DIGITAL CONTENT CREATOR

Timothy Young, is a 22-year-old native of Jackson, Mississippi and a 2019 graduate of Jackson State University where he received a B.A. in Marketing. Timothy joined the MS Votes team in July of 2020 as an Emerging Leader Fellowship Cohort member and officially transitioned in January 2021 into the Digital Content Creator. During his time with the organization he served as a Cohost for the Better Luck Podcast, a show which aims to put out the stories of the folks leading and building electoral power in Mississippi.

