



Voters are driving justice reform

BY ALEX BUSANSKY AND ELI LEHRER, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 04/03/19 06:00 PM EDT
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When crime rates soared between the 1970s and early 1990s, Democrats and Republicans alike did everything possible to avoid being labeled “soft on crime.” As crime has dropped, however, reforms that ease punitive measures, reduce correctional populations from the current level of more than 2.2 million, and give people who are formerly incarcerated a fresh start have become a bipartisan cause. Results from the 2018 midterms, particularly ballot measures backed by voters, should provide important advice for gearing up for the 2020 cycle. Criminal justice reform has become a winning issue with voters and advocates should pay heed.

Polling data make it clear how voters feel nationally. In a [recent article](#), pollster Celinda Lake says that by a two to one margin, voters believe that our country relies too much on incarcerating people. A [national poll](#) last year by Public Opinion Strategies showed that 68 percent of Republicans, 78 percent of Independents, and 80 percent of Democrats support significant reform. Places across the nation with very different politics have followed suit and moved towards significant justice system reforms.

In Florida, the same voters who narrowly elected a conservative governor, defeated a Democratic senator, and returned Republican control of the legislature, passed a measure allowing people with felony convictions to vote. This historic vote enfranchised 10 percent of the voting age people and more than 20 percent of African American adults in the state. Conservative Louisiana repealed its Jim Crow era law allowing jurors to convict without being unanimous. Colorado, while electing a Democratic governor and returning a Democratic legislature, passed meaningful reforms to outdated prison labor rules. In Tennessee, the liberal city of Nashville approved new police monitoring efforts.

This trend has lessons for what works at the state level and ought to give a significant tailwind to those looking to organize for the next cycle. Efforts are [already underway](#) to make Nebraska and Mississippi the latest states

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to legalize medical marijuana. This decriminalization of a drug that is now widely accepted is an important step because it reduces justice system involvement for many, particularly people of color, who are simply not dangerous to anyone. Likewise, Los Angeles County recently approved a plan to close the downtown Men's Central Jail, while killing a proposal to convert a detention facility into a women's jail. Next year, Los Angeles County voters will decide whether to pass a jail reform ballot measure.

Looking to 2020, citizens are already hearing justice reform touted by candidates of both parties. That is not surprising, and it is only going to increase. Politicians are catching up with American voters, who have already realized that both easing some unnecessarily harsh measures and helping those who have made mistakes become productive members of society is not just a good and right idea, it is a winning campaign issue.

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