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Should people on parole be able to vote? Some N.J. lawmakers want prisoners to cast ballots, too.

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A bill before New Jersey lawmakers could restore voting rights to tens of thousands of people in the state.

The proposal (A5823) would allow residents on probation or parole to cast ballots. It gets a hearing Thursday by the state Assembly Appropriations Committee.

Assemblyman Jamel Holley, D-Union, and one of the bill's sponsors, said people who had served their time behind bars deserved a say in the political process.

"They are part of our community," Holley said.

There were more than 56,000 people on probation last year, according to New Jersey's Administrative Office of the Courts. An additional 15,500 were on parole, according to the state parole board.

Advocates argue that extending voting rights is an extension of the civil rights movement, because of the criminal justice system's disproportionate impact on African-Americans. They also make the case that voting reduces recidivism, and helps people reintegrate into society.

Opponents have argued that losing the right to vote is a just punishment, and that criminals should be kept from influencing public policy.

Although the bill would still bar people in prison from voting, Holley said he hopes to change that next, and wants to work with the state Department of Corrections and other agencies to discuss inmates voting.

Other states have also changed how they treat people convicted of crimes. Maine and Vermont allow people in prison to vote. Florida recently restored voting rights to felons, but that change is currently before the state's supreme court.

New Jersey's proposal is sponsored or co-sponsored by a dozen Democrats.