



DEBATING FOR DEMOCRACY (D4D)[™] 2021 REQUEST FOR LETTERS TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL (RFP)



OVERVIEW: Debating for Democracy (D4D)[™] inspires students to become successful advocates in their communities. To encourage engaged citizenship, Project Pericles requests original letters to elected officials from teams (two or more students) at Periclean colleges and universities.

Five teams from five different colleges will win \$500 to work on their issue.

ELIGIBILITY: A student must a) be a full-time undergraduate at a Periclean campus; b) be a first, second, or third year student as defined by their college or university during spring 2021; c) write and mail a letter to an elected official, and d) provide a project proposal. Students must be returning to campus for the 2021-2022 academic year to ensure that winning teams can work on their issues.

SELECTION PROCESS: Students must submit their letter and project proposal to their Project Pericles Program Director by Friday, March 12, 2021 (you are welcome to set internal deadlines that are earlier). The Program Director will review each letter and select up to four to forward to Project Pericles. By Thursday, March 18, 2021 5 PM EST all letters should be submitted (in Microsoft Word) by Program Directors to Jan Liss (jan.liss@projectpericles.org). Each college or university may submit up to four letters to an elected official. A copy of the letter must also be mailed by March 18 from the students to the appropriate U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Senator, or State Representative. The names of all of the students who worked on each letter must be clearly identified.

A committee consisting of people with significant experience in public policy will review the submitted letters and project proposals using the criteria below and will select the winning teams for the 2021 D4D competition. We will announce the five winning teams in April 2021.

IMPORTANT DATES:

March 12, 2021 — All letters due to the Project Pericles Program Director. Program Directors may set an earlier deadline.

March 18, 2021 by 5 PM EST — All letters should be submitted (in Microsoft Word) by Program Directors to Jan Liss (jan.liss@projectpericles.org). Each college or university may submit up to four letters to an elected official. A copy of the letter must also be mailed to the appropriate U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Senator or State Representative.

April 2021 — Five winning teams announced.

AWARD:

- Project Pericles will provide a \$500 award to each of the top five teams.
- Students can use this money to fund advocacy and educational activities including advocacy trips and workshops. Project Pericles staff will work with the winning teams to develop their advocacy and education activities. Teams that have won this award in the past have organized mobilizing campaigns on their campuses, led trainings, and offered informative events such as documentary screenings, election debates, panel discussions, etc. Teams have also traveled to Washington, D.C. or to their state capital to meet with members of Congress or their legislators and their staffs to discuss the issues raised in their letters

JUDGING CRITERIA: The evaluation of each submission will rest on the students' success at conducting high quality policy analysis and research; clarity of presentation; and adherence to the rules detailed on pages 3-4. All submissions should include a project proposal that describes how the team would use an award to advance their issue.

1) Policy Analysis and Research: The most important aspect of the letter is the quality of the analysis and research (55% of the evaluation). The evaluation will rest on each team's success at identifying a federal or state policy problem in their letter, proposing a solution to the problem they identified, and conducting and interpreting research to bolster their letter.

- Does the letter present one public policy issue in a convincing manner?
- Does the letter focus on a federal or state public policy issue that impacts the student and their community and explain how this issue impacts them?
- Does the letter contain logical judgment and analysis?
- Does the letter demonstrate the use of primary (personal experience, community experts) and secondary resources (journal articles, books) to bolster their argument?
- Does the letter demonstrate an understanding of the historical context of the problem and solution being discussed?

2) Clarity of Presentation: The ability to write a clear and compelling letter will be considered. In addition to a logical argument, persuasive letters include a narrative about how the issue impacts the authors or other constituents (30% of the evaluation).

- Is the letter effective in communicating the significance of the problem and the solution?
- Do the authors offer a compelling narrative? Do the authors make a compelling case as constituents? Is there a tie-in to either the authors or other constituents from the elected official district?
- Are the letter and proposal clear and grammatically correct?

3) Quality of Related Project Proposal: The project proposal should present the authors' strategy to have a meaningful impact on the topic they tackle in the letter. As such, the proposal should clearly outline how students would use the \$500 award to instigate positive change. This section is worth 15% of the total evaluation. **It should not exceed two pages.**

- Is the project proposal creative and effective in addressing the problem presented in the letter?
- Is it feasible given time and financial constraints?

In all cases, the goal of your project should be to advance your issue. Campus events should have a tie-in to an “ask” in which you request that your fellow students or community members take an action, such as contacting their elected officials, that will advance your issue.

The award should be used for activities to move your issue forward. You are encouraged to think outside the box and come up with other ideas and suggestions. Possible uses may include, but are not limited to, advocacy and educational activities, such as advocacy trips, workshops, and other campus activities.

Typical uses of funds include, but are not limited to:

- Travel (lodging, meals, and transportation) costs to meet with your elected officials.
- Costs associated with campus or community activities that educate, inform, or raise awareness about your issue.
- Travel to another Periclean campus to educate their students about your issue.
- Printing costs associated with developing materials that educate people about your issue.
- Other (pre-approved) activities to move your issue forward.
- **Awards may not be used to pay honoraria to speakers.**

Letter and Project Proposal Writing Guidelines:

- The letter must be on a state or federal issue. Letters on local issues will not be eligible. The majority of local issues are also important federal and state issues.
- The body of the letter may not exceed **1200 words** (excluding footnotes and project proposal).
- Students must identify their elected official and their address. Since the authors will be urging their elected official to support or oppose a legislative solution, they will want to select the official who will be most responsive to their letter. The following websites will help identify federal or state elected officials.
http://act.commoncause.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sunlight_advocacy_list_page
or
<http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml>
- A copy of the letter must be mailed to each student’s elected official by March 18, 2021.
- The letter must begin with the phrase "Dear Representative (last name)" or Dear Senator (last name)" and be addressed correctly.
- The letter should begin with a sentence that tells the elected official exactly what the student wants them to do. The first sentence in the letter on page 5 provides an example.
- The letter should contain the student’s mailing address so that the elected official can confirm them as a constituent and the elected official can write back.
- The students must sign and date their letter.
- All primary and secondary sources used in preparing the proposal must be cited.
- The project proposal should not exceed two pages.

Eligibility (additional guidelines):

- Two or more students **must** work on the letter and project proposal.
- Students who were finalists (meaning they received an award) in a previous year are not eligible to participate.
- No student can co-author more than one submitted letter.

ADDITIONAL TIPS, GUIDELINES, AND RESOURCES

“Letters are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.” American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Many federal and state policy issues are suitable for this letter. Possible issues include:
*Campaign Finance * Climate Change * Education Access * Federal Budget Deficit
Gun Control * Health Care * Immigration * LGBTQ+ Advocacy * Mass Incarceration
Race and Inequality * U.S. Involvement in the Middle East * Voter Engagement*

In the letter, students must identify one national or state public policy issue to be addressed and analyze how this issue impacts them personally, people in their community, people in their state, and, if a federal issue, people across the United States. In the letter, students must recommend at least one legislative solution. The students may recommend an original legislative solution (fund a NASA mission to Jupiter) or they can support or oppose a portion of a bill that is currently pending before Congress or their state legislature. In both cases, the students must support their solution with data and examples from at least two outside sources (books, journals, reliable internet sources) and discuss why their solution is better than other options. ***All outside research must be properly cited.***

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

The following resources will assist the student in writing their letter:

- A letter written by students at Pitzer College that was selected as a finalist in 2020 appears on pages 5-9. **This letter is an excellent model.** The five letters that were finalists in 2019 can be viewed at https://www.projectpericles.org/uploads/1/2/2/7/122788165/2019_legislative_hearing_program_final.pdf
- Congress.gov provides detailed federal legislative information to the Members of Congress, legislative. <https://www.congress.gov>
- C-SPAN is a private, non-profit company, created by the cable television industry as a public service. Its mission is to provide public access to the political process. The C-SPAN website contains a wealth of information including video of Congressional hearings related to a number of federal policy issues. <http://www.c-span.org>
- The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. The NCSL website provides research and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. <http://www.ncsl.org/>

Example of a Winning Letter and Project Proposal:

Pitzer College

A Letter Proposing Sponsorship of Assembly Constitutional Amendment ACA 6 to Re-establish the Right to Vote for Californians on Parole

Date: December 7, 2019

From: Uma Fry Demetria & Jessica Sass

The Honorable Toni G. Atkins
Capitol Office
State Capitol, Room 205
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Senator Toni G. Atkins,

We write to implore you, as the President Pro Tempore of the California State Senate, to cosponsor Assembly Constitutional Amendment ACA 6. This bill, introduced by assembly members in 2019, would re-establish the fundamental right to vote for Californians on parole with a 2021 ballot initiative to amend California’s Constitution and update relevant state Elections Code. Today, 50,000 Californians are prohibited from participating in local, state, and federal elections merely because they are on parole.¹ As individuals with diverse identities who have lived in California our entire lives, we are proud that our home state is renowned for being a champion of its residents' civil rights. However, California fails to meet its promise of a just and inclusive democracy without ACA 6.

Felony disenfranchisement in California’s Constitution is traced to a legacy of racial discrimination beginning with Jim Crow laws in the 1800s. When the 15th Amendment of the U.S Constitution outlawed voter disenfranchisement based on race, California - fearing a rise in the political power of black and brown communities - rejected it. Accordingly, California wrote felony disenfranchisement into its constitution in 1849 to thwart racial minorities’ access to the polls.² Although our state constitution was amended in the 1970s to be less oppressive, California state elections law still bars individuals in state or federal prison, or on parole, from voting. In contrast, various amendments have granted individuals on probation or in county jails the right to vote.³

More and more, efforts to restore voting rights among individuals with convictions are

¹ Apostol-Dooley, Ariana. “Free the Vote: Unlocking Democracy for People on Parole in California.” *Ella Baker Center for*

Human Rights , Ella Baker Center, 1 Nov. 2019, ellabakercenter.org/ACA6Ariana.

² “Restoring the Right to Vote for People on Parole .” *League of Women Voters* , LWVBAE , 28 Mar. 2019, www.lwvbae.org/league-news/restoring-the-right-to-vote-for-people-on-parole/.

³ “ California Code, Elections Code - ELEC § 2300.” *FindLaw* , Thomson Reuters, 2019, codes.findlaw.com/ca/elections-code/elec-sect-2300.html.

transpiring across the country. Currently, 18 states and the District of Columbia either have automatic restoration of voting rights following release from incarceration, or have no felony disenfranchisement to begin with.⁴ In the past year, Colorado and Nevada have restored voting rights to individuals on parole, and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo invoked an executive order to remove a ban on parolees voting. Even traditionally conservative states such as Florida, Wyoming and Louisiana have begun the process of voting restoration for felons following sentence completion.⁵ The time has come for California to finally grant individuals on parole their fundamental right to vote, and join other states in the movement to end a history of racist felony disenfranchisement.

Felony disenfranchisement is a euphemism for voter suppression and embodies a criminal justice system that has historically deprived minorities of their political power. Due to felony disenfranchisement laws, one in every 13 African Americans have lost their right to vote. In comparison, only one in every 56 non-African Americans have lost their right to vote for the same reason.⁶ California's granting of the right to vote to individuals on probation not only fails to address this issue, but perpetuates felony disenfranchisement laws that disproportionately affect people of color. This is due to the fact that prosecutors are twice as likely to charge people of color with heavier sentences than whites.⁷ Further, judges significantly award probation more to whites in comparison to minorities - making this not only an issue of race, but class as well.⁸ California is systematically extinguishing the votes of colored and lower income individuals through felony disenfranchisement laws. Passing ACA 6 not only confronts racial discrimination and voter suppression, it also supports racial justice and invigorates California's democracy.

Opponents of ACA 6 argue that individuals on parole sacrifice the right to vote the minute they commit a crime and that voter disenfranchisement protects public safety. However, Californians on parole work, pay taxes, raise families, and are overall active members in our communities. Robbing individuals who are being reintegrated into society of their right to vote is detrimental because states that restore voting rights to parolees have lower recidivism rates.⁹ One study found that former felons who voted were 50% less likely to commit a crime in the following three years compared to those who did not.¹⁰ The American Probation and Parole Association

⁴ "Felon Voting Rights ." *NCSL: National Conference of State Legislatures* , NCSL, 2019, www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx.

⁵ "Felon Voting Rights ." *NCSL, 2019*

⁶ Chung, Jean. "Felony Disenfranchisement." *The Sentencing Project* , The Sentencing Project, 26 Nov. 2019, www.sentencingproject.org/issues/felony-disenfranchisement/.

⁷ Crawford , Charles, and Ted Chiricos . "Race, Racial Threat, and Sentencing of Habitual Offenders ." *Criminology* , vol. 36, no. 3, 1998, pp. 481–512.

⁸ Morgan, Kathryn D. "Race Issues in Probation and Parole." *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice* , 27 Nov. 2018, pp. 48–63.

⁹ Chung, Jean. "Felony Disenfranchisement." , 2019

¹⁰ Bala et al., "Restoring voting rights for felons embraces the American tenet of second chances." *The Hill* (December 16, 2019), available at

supports ACA 6 because it recognizes that when individuals feel their voices are valued, they are less likely to be reinvolved in criminal activity.¹¹

Parole is designed to be a re-entry period that assists individuals reintegration into society.¹² Yet, denying people on parole the right to vote renders them “civically dead” and bars them from having a stake in their community. For example, parolees would benefit from voting on legislation about whether job applications can ask a criminal record question. Opponents to ACA 6 fail to recognize the context of parolees everyday lives are impacted by laws they have no say in. Overall, this furthers the divide between the formerly incarcerated and the rest of society, a consequence that reverses the healing process and obstructs re-integration.

As your constituents, and passionate advocates for the racial and civic equality our state promises, we believe you have the unique power as the President Pro Tempore of the California State Senate, to enhance the support required for ACA 6 to pass. Co-sponsoring this bill would signify your commitment to confront the legacy of racial discrimination in California’s felony disenfranchisement laws and demonstrate your understanding that for our democracy to be true, every voice must matter. Civic engagement is democracy in practice. Passing ACA 6 will lower recidivism rates, give deserving individuals the opportunity to choose the representatives and policies that shape their lives, and restore citizens’ most fundamental right.

Even more, you have the ability to make California an important example and spark attention to the larger issue our nation faces. In our country today, 4.6 million people are unable to vote due to a felony conviction.¹³ California has historically been a leader for the rest of the nation on civil rights issues, yet, we have fallen short. We urge you to cosponsor ACA 6 and allow our state to join in a movement of justice, equality, and freedom, like it has done so many times in the past. This goal may seem daunting, but nothing is impossible with small amounts of progress. That is why to begin, we ask you to stand alongside California residents and fight to change the history of our states undemocratic felony disenfranchisement laws.

Sincerely,
Jessica Sass, Pitzer College
Uma Fry Demetria, Pitzer College
1050 N. Mills Ave
Claremont, CA 91711

<https://thehill.com/opinion/criminal-justice/474650-restoring-voting-rights-for-felons-embraces-the-american-tenet-of>

¹¹ McCarthy et al., “Community Fact Sheet - Restore the Vote to People on Parole.” *Ella Baker Center*(September 9,2019), available at:

https://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/ACA%206_%20Free%20The%20Vote%20Community%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

¹² Wood , Erika. *Restoring the Right to Vote* . 2nd ed., Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2009.

¹³ “Assembly Constitutional Amendment (ACA) 6 Passes CA Assembly.” *ACLU Northern California* , ACLU , 5 Sept. 2019,

www.aclunc.org/news/assembly-constitutional-amendment-aca-6-passes-ca-assembly

Project Proposal:

Overview:

Today around 50,000 residents of California are unable to vote in local, state, and federal elections, simply because they are on parole. As a result, California fails to be a just and inclusive democracy. We aim to solve this problem by meeting directly with elected officials and running workshops with politically active coalitions to break down information barriers parolee populations face when it comes to civic engagement. By taking a trip to our state's capital and engaging in community outreach, we believe we can harness the support that ACA 6 needs in order to pass in the Senate.

Goal:

The goal of this project is to launch policy action by California elected officials while addressing the issue among the affected community itself through education and raising awareness. This would not only put ACA 6 on the 2021 ballot, but ensure that individuals on parole have resources and information that help them understand why their vote matters so much. Even more, we believe that California's commitment to confront racial discrimination and voter suppression can set an example for the rest of the nation. We aim to launch a project that's larger effects reduce recidivism rates, support racial justice, and invigorate not only California's democracy, but our own.

Target audience:

Our target audience is members of the California State Legislative process. We intend to target members of Assembly and state senators that are on Election and Constitutional Amendments, Education, Human Services. The ACA 6 has already been addressed and passed on the assembly floor. Our next steps are gaining support on the senate floor, then support from California Governor Newsom to get it on the 2020 ballot initiative. Our second target audience are politically active coalitions such as Critical Resistance, Ella Baker Center, ACLU, Initiate Justice, and Anti Recidivism Coalition (ARC). They will aid us in creating workshops for people on parole and probation geared towards creating an influx in political engagement and voter mobilization. Each organization has multiple locations across the state, therefore, each community will be reached.

Activities:

Our two activities enable legislative change through grassroots organizing. We intend to travel to Sacramento in order to meet with Toni Atkins and get her to cosponsor ACA 6. Senator Atkins, has the most amount of sway among other state senators due to her position as President Pro Tempore. While in Sacramento, we will meet with other Congressmen to explain the significance of this issue and gain support. In order to enact lasting legislative change, we need members of Congress on board that may be traditionally against this reform. To sway members of Congress that are non-receptive, we will explain similar changes in Election Codes that have been implemented in other states. We will emphasize the impact of lower recidivism rates due to the change in California State Election Code. Additionally, we will make clear the bill is non-partisan. Going to Sacramento will facilitate legislative change "in the room where it happens."

For our second activity we will implement a workshop with coalitions that specialize in criminal justice reform. These organizations include Anti Recidivism Coalition, Critical Resistance, Ella

Baker Center, ACLU, and Initiate Justice. This workshop will be created with the expertise of education facilitators and organizers from these coalitions. The workshop will be geared towards people on parole or probation to help them seek clarity around civic engagement. The workshop will mobilize voters and increase voter turnout and political engagement. Having workshops that engage with vulnerable populations are critical to lowering recidivism rates and helping people get reintegrated back into society.

Budget breakdown:

| Activity | Supplies | Cost |
|--------------------------------|---|-------|
| Flight to Sacramento | (2 Tickets) Metro from Claremont to Union Station Shuttle Bus → LAX Round Trip LAX → SAC | \$325 |
| Activities in Coalition Spaces | Creative supplies for workshop Small honorarium for speakers | \$175 |