

Daily Press

Voting Rights

Our goal is to re-integrate felons as productive members of society. Restoring voting rights will help.

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Here's a bright spot in Gov. Tim Kaine's legacy: He has brought 3,598 felons a small step closer to rejoining society. He did it by restoring their voting rights after they served their time.

As far back as state records go - 1938 - that's a gubernatorial high, beating the record set by his predecessor, Mark Warner.

But it's still democracy by exception. The right to vote should be restored automatically.

Virginia is rare among states in its punitive approach to this issue: It strips felons of the right to vote for life. Also lost are two other fundamentals of a citizen-run form of government: the right to hold elected office and the right to serve on a jury.

In order to have voting rights restored, a convicted felon must be out of prison and off probation, wait several years and file a formal petition. Until Warner reformed the process, it was downright intimidating, requiring completion of a 13-page form (he trimmed it to one page for nonviolent offenders), but the process still takes months. And the supplicant is still at the governor's mercy. Kaine and Warner have been inclined to mercy on this front, but some governors are not.

The approach is problematic on several counts.

First, there's something fundamentally wrong with stripping citizens of basic rights when they have fulfilled the obligations society has justly imposed on them. Even when a felon has completed his sentence and his probation and parole if ordered, even if he has led a blame-free life after release, the only way he can regain the right to vote is by petitioning the governor. It becomes not a right, but a privilege, something one has to plead for.

Second, it works against the interests of society. The biggest challenge facing our corrections system, and many communities, is the terrible job we do of re-integrating released prisoners into society. Our correctional facilities have abandoned the pretense of rehabilitation and do not effectively address the issues - drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, lack of education - that confound so many inmates and will lead them right back into crime and prison unless their path is rerouted.

Many prisoners leave prison not only illprepared to make a life out of something other than crime, but angry and alienated. A social policy that feeds that feeling, that says that "Our law, and the way we treat you, presume that you are not worthy to participate in decent society," only makes it worse.