

The News Leader

Felons Deserve Voting Rights

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As with all legal questions, there are arguments on either side of felons' voting rights. While advocacy groups (many of them Democratic) push outgoing Gov. Tim Kaine to offer a blanket restoration of voting rights to felons in Virginia, Kaine says each decision must be made on its own merits.

Advocacy groups point out that only Kentucky has laws requiring voting rights restoration as harsh as Virginia's. When someone convicted of a felony here wants to register to vote, he or she must go through a laborious application process, and the governor has to decide whether to grant the request on an individual basis.

That means as many as 300,000 Virginians are left out of the most important civic exercise most of us enjoy. Paying your fines and serving your sentence are not enough.

They should be enough. That's why we have sentencing laws and guidelines. The punishment should stop when the sentence has been served.

Not so in Virginia. If the law was designed to deter crime, it's not working. More likely it was a backward-thinking rule that sought to purify the voting pool, not unlike other voting guidelines Virginia is famous for, such as poll taxes and literacy tests.

The cumbersome method to restore rights not only punishes the felons, but also holds Virginia back. The ripple effects include children of the felons who might not understand why mom or dad doesn't vote, but understand it's not important to establish the habit themselves.

We applaud Kaine for the thousands of voters he put back on the rolls after restoring their rights. We call on him during his last few weeks as governor to offer the blanket restoration. True, it might not happen. It will be held up on appeals.

At least the idea will be given a fighting chance.

All of us deserve that.