

The Roanoke Times

Ex-offenders should have voting rights

It's a new era in the Old Dominion; time to banish Jim Crow.

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Virginia and Kentucky share the dubious distinction of having the harshest laws in the nation when it comes to felons' voting rights. Basically, ex-felons have none.

Once convicted of a felony, a Virginian is disenfranchised for life, barring a successful petition to the governor for restoration -- a stricture that disproportionately affects the black vote in Virginia. That's likely by design.

Disenfranchisement laws were written into the commonwealth's 1902 constitution, less than 40 years after the Old South lost the Civil War and well into post-Reconstruction's Jim Crow era.

More than 100 years later, it's time to strike this vestige of racial discrimination.

Advocates of just such action will be holding a "Voices for the Vote" rally this afternoon at Elmwood Park in Roanoke, trying to raise public consciousness of the issue and released felons' awareness that they can ask the governor to restore this essential right.

A felon who has completed his sentence, fulfilled all the terms imposed by the court and kept a clean record can petition the governor to restore his right to vote, but it takes time and some effort.

Violent offenders must wait five years, then make a convincing case that they've reformed. Nonviolent offenders, though, can file a one-page application after three years without a subsequent misdemeanor or felony conviction.

Democratic Gov. Mark Warner streamlined the process for them, and he and his successor, fellow Democrat Tim Kaine, together have restored voting rights for more than 7,000 former prisoners -- more than the combined total of the 11 governors who preceded them.

Still, the figure is small stacked up against Virginia's 300,000 felons, half of whom are black -- a percentage that far outstrips the less than 20 percent of blacks in the state's voting-age population.

The state properly punishes crimes, but should not impose a lifetime sentence of marginalization by stripping ex-offenders of their rights as citizens.

Once they've paid their debt to society, former felons should have the opportunity to become productive members of the community and participate in it fully -- to work, pay taxes and have a vote.