

# The Virginian-Pilot

## Felon Voting Ban Isolates Virginia

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It's shameful that civil rights organizations and out-of-state newspaper editorialists feel compelled to petition Gov. Mark Warner for a blanket restoration of voting rights for thousands of freed felons.

If the Virginia General Assembly were doing its job, an orderly, prompt procedure for the automatic restoration of such rights to individuals who've served their time and completed restitution would have been in place long ago.

Virginia is one of just four states where all felons are stripped of voting and other citizenship rights for life. While Warner has done far more to speed the appeals process for reinstating such privileges than any previous governor, the process can still be cumbersome and take years, if it happens at all.

With the exceptions of Virginia, Kentucky, Florida, and Alabama, every state automatically restores voting rights for some or all felons, either as soon as the terms of a sentence are complete or after a prescribed waiting period. Both Nebraska and Iowa dropped lifetime bans within the last year.

In Iowa's case, that occurred through an executive order issued by Gov. Tom Vilsack.

Most Americans recognize that it's counterproductive to forever freeze law-breakers on the fringe of society. The General Assembly stands outside that mainstream. Legislative efforts to speed the restoration process, or make it automatic for at least certain crimes, rarely survive even a single layer of legislative review.

While Gov. Warner could take matters into his own hands, that's not the preferable course. A "blanket" action on a matter involving hundreds of thousands of former law-breakers smacks of a risky randomness. It also wouldn't apply to future freed felons.

The better option is to engage multiple minds in tailoring a policy, one that generally restores voting rights automatically but could allow for distinctions based on the frequency or seriousness of offenses. In other words, the General Assembly ought to assume this responsibility, and this year.

Turning felons into lifetime pariahs may satisfy some vengeful instinct, but it's not useful public policy at a time when prison populations have swelled. The history of such statutes in Jim Crow-America says all that needs to be said about their legitimacy and intent.

Almost every state in America has moved on. It's time that Virginia did as well, not just through the pen of a single governor, but through the collective determination of the men and women who make our laws.