

The Washington Post

Restoring the Vote

Gov. Kaine is right to grant felons a say in the democratic process.

Editorial, June 24, 2008

SOME STATE Republicans object to Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's effort to enfranchise felons who have completed their prison sentences. The contention is that Mr. Kaine (D) wants to give thousands of felons the vote in a plot to deliver Virginia's 13 electoral votes to Democratic Sen. Barack Obama in the presidential election. We have no reason to believe Mr. Kaine is acting on political motives, but even if he were, his actions affirm a truth that all but a few states have accepted: Felons who pay their debt to society should not be denied the right to vote.

"I don't know a lot of young Republicans who end up being felons," Del. C. Todd Gilbert (R-Shenandoah) told Post reporter Tim Craig. How Mr. Gilbert knows that most felons are likely to be Democrats is a mystery. Little research exists on the voting patterns of felons, according to Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, a nonpartisan group that focuses on criminal justice reform.

Other Republicans, such as Del. Robert B. Bell (R-Charlottesville), offer a more reasonable critique. Mr. Bell, a former prosecutor, believes felons should complete a detailed application that includes letters of recommendation to regain voting rights. Otherwise, he said, there's a "high risk" they could "reoffend." The possibility of a felon relapsing into crime, however, should not enter the equation.

In the end, the commotion surrounding felon voting rights in Virginia may be much ado about little. From 1982 to 2004, about 5,000 Virginia felons had their voting rights restored, an average of fewer than 250 a year. Under former governor Mark R. Warner (D), that number increased. Even with civic and social organizations launching unprecedented efforts to restore voting rights for felons, it is unlikely that more than a few thousand felons will seek to exercise their right to vote. And, despite the dubious certainty of Mr. Gilbert, some of these felons will vote Republican.

When it comes to felony voting rights, the Virginia constitution is a decade behind the times. Sixteen states have broadened voting rights for felons since 1997. Last year, Maryland allowed felons to vote immediately after completing prison sentences. Since April, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, a Republican, has helped restore the voting rights of more than 115,000 ex-offenders in his state. Virginia legislators should make restoration automatic. Until they do, Mr. Kaine is right to grant voting rights to felons who have completed their sentences. Felons who have served their time shouldn't be excluded from the democratic process.