
OPINION

Minnesota: Hear the case for letting parolees and those on probation vote: Pioneer Press editorial

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A remarkable coalition of Minnesotans has formed to support a measure that would restore voting rights sooner to those with felony convictions.

The measure deserves the committee attention it needs to advance in the Minnesota House, along with full and fair consideration from all of us.

Lawmakers and citizens should note the diversity of groups — liberal and conservative and hybrids thereof — lending their support. Restore the Vote-Minnesota, at restorethevotemn.org, involves more than 60 public safety, faith, civic engagement and advocacy organizations.

Supporters of the measure who came to discuss it with our editorial board this week were Ramsey County Attorney John Choi; Jason Adkins of the Minnesota Catholic Conference; Walter Hudson of the Republican Liberty Caucus; Mark Haase, an attorney with the Council on Crime and Justice; and Gina Evans, lending her voice and experience to the campaign as a previously disenfranchised voter, after a drug conviction.

Under the measure, Minnesota would join 13 other states in allowing those who have committed felonies to vote after completing their period of incarceration.

Now, the state requires completion of the full sentence — including probation and parole — before voting rights are restored.

The coalition says that 47,000 Minnesotans would be able to vote if its measure is signed into law.

The coalition's advocacy comes at a time people are rethinking some purely punitive criminal-justice policies of the past, including the notion that parole and probation are simply another part of the sentence to be served. The coalition's approach emphasizes restoration, not just retribution, Adkins told us.

The point: When people return to the community to rebuild their lives, they should have a voice in decisions that affect them. For those to whom that matters, participation aids in that rebuilding. Evans told us about working, paying taxes and owning a home, without the ability to vote on matters like school levies with a direct impact on her family.

In 2011, of the 63,000 Minnesotans who were unable to vote because of a past criminal conviction, only about 16,000 were behind bars, the coalition notes on its website. "In other words, 75 percent of those who have been denied the right to vote under Minnesota law are living in the community, working to earn a wage and support their families, and paying taxes."

Here, as elsewhere, racial disparities are apparent: 7.4 percent of African-American Minnesotans and 5.9 percent of American-Indian Minnesotans are disenfranchised, the coalition says, compared with 1.1 percent of white Minnesotans. Restoring the vote to those on probation and parole would reduce Minnesota's African-American disenfranchisement rate to 2.7 percent.

The coalition, which cites research that shows correlation between voting and lower recidivism, also makes these key points:

Election integrity: Changing the law to disenfranchise those convicted of a felony only while incarcerated will create “a simple and bright line” that will reduce confusion among those unsure of their voting rights and save law enforcement resources.

Future voters: Research has shown that children are more likely to vote as adults if they are raised by parents who engage in the voting process, the coalition says. “By disenfranchising people who are not behind bars, we lose not only the voice of those directly impacted by disenfranchisement; we also discourage participation by future generations.”

The gravity of offenses: The coalition has heard the argument that its bill does not distinguish between types of felons, Adkins told us. “Our response is that dangerous people should be behind bars.”

But once the community decides that they should be out on supervised release and starting to rebuild their lives, “then they have served their time of incarceration and it is time to restore even those who have committed grave offenses to the community,” he said.

Coalition members also reject election-reform claims that changes would bring more Democrats to the polls. “I don't think that's what being a Republican stands for,” Hudson told the editorial board.

The measure has the bipartisan support we expect when it comes to election reforms. The House bill — with Rep. Tony Cornish, a Republican from Vernon Center and a retired police officer as chief author — has a long list of both Republicans and Democrats as co-authors, including several from the east metro.

They, and the coalition, should prevail in securing the measure the hearing it deserves before lawmakers and the public. Let it be heard, and then decide if the case for a change is persuasive.

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