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Editorials



In our view April 16: Progress for Felons
Those who have completed incarceration are one step closer to regaining right to vote

Thursday, April 16 | 1:00 a.m.

State senators correctly voted on Wednesday to restore voting rights to tens of thousands of felons once they complete their incarceration. The decision was as decisive as it was logical. The vote was 29-19, basically along party lines, with Vancouver Democrat Craig Pridemore wisely voting for the measure and local Republican senators Joe Zarelli and Don Benton opposing it.

The bill returns to the House, where it passed last month, for a vote on an amended version. Senators on Wednesday approved an amendment that would allow voting rights to be revoked again if a felon intentionally fails to comply with legal financial obligations. We're not sure that amendment contributes much to the bill. It would seem to place on felons who no longer are incarcerated an additional financial requirement to vote that nonfelons do not face. Even so, the imperfect bill would be an improvement over the status quo. We hope it is approved by the House, where its sponsors include Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver.

Arguments both for and against felons regaining voting rights (after incarceration) are rational and reasonable. Two opposing views are presented in capsulized forms accompanying this editorial.

If this change occurs, Washington will become the 14th state (joining Oregon) to restore voting rights to felons who complete their incarceration. Two states — Vermont and Maine — allow even incarcerated felons to vote. That's too lenient, in our view, but once a felon comes out from behind bars, regaining the right to vote could accomplish three things.

First, regaining the right to vote could encourage many felons to obey laws and avoid recidivism. They were accustomed to rewards for good behavior in prison, and this would be one more reward for them to earn.

Second, it would encourage participation in the democratic process. After being under government's thumb (deservedly, for they broke the law), felons could reclaim in the right to vote a way to help elect those who serve in that same government.

Third, this change would signal to felons that society is more interested in compliance with the law than in exacting revenge. Our state's current prohibition of voting by felons after incarceration is not only malicious, it's essentially a poll tax, denying to poor felons the right to vote that affluent felons are able to reclaim. Currently, felons cannot vote until completion of parole or probation and payment of all restitution and other court fees. The new law would allow them to vote as long as they stay current on payments.

The partisan debate is driven by the fact that a disproportionately high number of people of color are felons; conceivably that could favor Democrats. But more than a political dispute, this is a civil rights issue. When felons complete their time behind bars, they have earned the right to vote, and that right should be restored.

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The debate

Should voting rights be restored to felons who are no longer incarcerated?

-- PRO: According to felonvoting.procon.org, Republican Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, a former state attorney general, in 2007 wrote: "Some who favor the current system argue that restoring civil rights is somehow 'weak on crime,' as if restoring the right to vote ... lessens the punishment or encourages a person to commit new crimes. In fact, the opposite should be true. Giving a person a meaningful way to re-enter society ... and participate in our democracy will incentivize good behavior."

-- CON: According to a 2007 Washington Times editorial: "Most people think perpetrators of serious crimes have violated the public trust and cannot be permitted to help determine the future of the communities they harmed ... serious lawbreakers should not help elect the country's lawmakers."

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