

Kimberly Haven: Who's not voting in Maryland?

Kimberly Haven, The Examiner
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BALTIMORE -

Tuesday was primary day in Maryland, and I could not vote. Maryland law bars me from voting until 2009 because I have been previously convicted of a felony. I cannot vote even though I work every day, live in and support my community, lead an honest life and value the power of voting. I, and more than 100,000 others like me, are barred from the polls because of a felony conviction.

Maryland is one of only 11 states that permanently disenfranchise some or all persons convicted of a felony who have completed their sentence, making it one of the most restrictive states in the nation.

The result is that thousands of Maryland citizens who have done their time in prison are still unable to vote when they re-enter society.

Disenfranchised citizens are living, working and raising families all across Maryland.

Though we pay taxes and care about the future of our communities, we have no voice in our government.

In his 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush noted, "America is the land of second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."

Instead of opening a path to a better life, Maryland's disenfranchisement law sends a loud and clear message to people with a felony conviction who are trying to rebuild their lives that no matter how hard you try, and no matter how much you contribute, you will remain a second-class citizen.

Removing the stigma of past mistakes and encouraging people to participate as full citizens is far more likely to promote their successful reintegration into their communities.

Indeed, the ability to vote fosters a sense of responsibility and belonging, two critical elements of reintegration.

Studies have shown that people with felony convictions who vote are less likely to be re-arrested than those who do not vote. Thus, restoring the vote not only helps individuals with criminal records, but more broadly promotes public safety.

States are increasingly recognizing that it makes sense to lower the barriers to full civic participation.

Since 1997, 14 states, including Maryland, have either made legislative or policy changes restoring the vote to at least some people with criminal convictions or eased restoration procedures.

Yet, nationwide, more than 5 million Americans remain ineligible to vote based solely on a felony conviction.

To continue to deny a basic right of citizenship undermines the future of people like me who have come home from prison.

For those of us who are struggling to leave our pasts behind and be good parents, employees and taxpayers, laws that prevent us from voting serve as a constant reminder that we are unwelcome in our communities.

Chief Justice Earl Warren once said, “Citizenship is not a license that expires upon misbehavior ... and deprivation of citizenship is not a weapon that the Government may use to express displeasure at a citizen’s conduct”

I believe in his sentiment. A truly democratic government of the people incorporates all of our voices and values the positive contributions of all its citizens.

It is important that if you truly believe in democracy, that you let your elected officials know that you support the restoration of voting rights and want to see legislation passed in 2007.

In the meantime, on behalf of myself and the 100,000 others currently disenfranchised, please vote in the upcoming election — for those of us who can’t.

Kimberly Haven is executive director of Justice Maryland and its voter re-enfranchisement initiative, Maryland Got Democracy? Justice Maryland is waging campaigns to restore voting rights to Maryland’s more than 140,000 disenfranchised former felons (www.gotdemocracy.org). She will be eligible to vote in 2009 and can be reached at kimberly@gotdemocracy.org.

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