

Once Out Of Jail, Let Felons Vote

Wisconsin State Journal :: OPINION :: A10

Thursday, November 10, 2005

PAUL MALISCHKE

Two Wisconsin officials have independently proposed a solution to the problem of felons voting. These two men are among the most experienced in the state in running elections. Their solution is simple: Once they are out of prison, let them vote.

Kevin Kennedy, executive director of the State Elections Board for over 20 years, recommended this to the board:

"We are needlessly complicating the administration of elections by criminalizing behavior that is at the heart of representative government. There have been an inordinate number of legislative and administrative proposals put forward to identify and prevent convicted felons who are actively participating in society under the supervision of the Department of Corrections from participating in the electoral process. Our administrative resources could be much better focused without this diversion."

Previous to being elected to the state Assembly, Rep. Joe Parisi, D-Madison, was the longtime Dane County clerk in charge of elections. Parisi is introducing legislation that would restore the right to vote once felons have served their prison time. He says, "The state is currently reviewing an elaborate process to make sure former inmates don't vote. I say let them vote; encourage them to become productive, participating members of society, and use those scarce tax dollars on something more pressing,"

This change in state law would have three advantages:

Easier election administration. Poll workers would not have to compare registrants and voters with a list of felons on probation. Those who now have to produce such a list would save money and time. Anyone who walks in the door to a polling place would not be excluded because of a previous felon record. In the past, many innocent people have had their rights abused because they had names similar to felons.

Save government dollars. Today we are spending precious government resources of the FBI, district attorney and courts to prosecute the "crime" of voting. In a time when law enforcement budgets are tight, let these people concentrate on more important crimes.

Rehabilitate felons. Let's end the idea of punishing people who are out of jail by not letting them vote. Instead, let's welcome them into full citizenship, rehabilitate them, and turn them into productive citizens and taxpayers. Let's engage them in the democratic process. Society needs them to become productive and stay away from further incidents that would send them back. As taxpayers, our goal should be full rehabilitation so we can reduce our huge prison expenditures.

\ Malischke lives in Madison.