Stolberg, Sheryl. “Virginia Governor Restores Voting Rights to Felons.” *The NewYork*

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WASHINGTON — Gov. [Terry McAuliffe](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/terry_mcauliffe/index.html?inline=nyt-per) of Virginia used his executive power on Friday to restore voting rights to more than 200,000 convicted felons, circumventing his Republican-run Legislature. The action overturns a Civil War-era provision in the state’s Constitution aimed, he said, at disenfranchising African-Americans.

The sweeping order, in a swing state that could play a role in deciding the November presidential election, will enable all felons who have served their prison time and finished parole to register to vote. Most are African-Americans, a core constituency of Democrats, Mr. McAuliffe’s political party.

Amid intensifying national attention over harsh sentencing policies that have disproportionately affected African-Americans, governors and legislatures around the nation have been debating — and often fighting over — moves to restore voting rights for convicted felons.

In Kentucky, Gov. Matt Bevin, a newly elected Republican, recently overturned an order enacted by his Democratic predecessor that was similar to the one Mr. McAuliffe signed Friday. In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, vetoed a measure to restore voting rights to convicted felons, but Democrats in the state legislature overrode him in February; an estimated 44,000 former prisoners who are on probation are now eligible to register to vote as a result.

“There’s no question that we’ve had a horrible history in voting rights as relates to African-Americans — we should remedy it,” Mr. McAuliffe said Thursday, previewing the announcement he made on the steps of Virginia’s Capitol, just yards from where President Abraham Lincoln once addressed freed slaves. “We should do it as soon as we possibly can.”

The action, which Mr. McAuliffe said was justified under an expansive legal interpretation of his executive clemency authority, goes far beyond what other governors have done, experts say, and will almost certainly provoke a backlash from Virginia Republicans, who have resisted measures to expand felons’ voting rights. It was planned in secrecy, and came amid an intensifying national debate over race, voting and the criminal justice system.

There is no way to know how many of the newly eligible voters in Virginia will register, but Mr. McAuliffe said he would encourage all to do so. “My message is going to be that I have now done my part,” he said.

The Republican Party of Virginia quickly issued a statement accusing Mr. McAuliffe of “political opportunism” and “a transparent effort to win votes.”

“Those who have paid their debts to society should be allowed full participation in society,” said the statement, issued by the party chairman, John Whitbeck. “But there are limits.” He said the governor was wrong to issue a blanket restoration of rights, even to those who “committed heinous acts of violence.”

Only two states — Maine and Vermont — have no voting restrictions on felons. Of the remaining 48, 12 states [disenfranchise felons](https://www.brennancenter.org/criminal-disenfranchisement-laws-across-united-states) after they have completed probation or parole, said Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, a Washington policy organization that advocates restoring felons’ voting rights.

Virginia is one of four states — the others are Kentucky, Florida and Iowa — that impose the harshest restrictions. The Sentencing Project says one in five African-Americans in Virginia is disenfranchised.

In Kentucky, Mr. Bevin, who took office in November, promptly overturned an executive order issued by his predecessor, Steven L. Beshear, [just before he left office](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/us/kentucky-governor-restores-voting-rights-to-thousands-of-felons.html). (Mr. Beshear’s order did not cover violent criminals.) Then, last week, Mr. Bevin signed into law a less expansive measure, allowing felons to petition judges to vacate their convictions, which would enable them to vote.

Mr. Mauer called Mr. McAuliffe’s decision a stunning development, and one that will have lasting consequences because it will remain in effect at least until January 2018, when Mr. McAuliffe leaves office. It covers those convicted of violent crimes, including murder and rape.

“This will be the single most significant action on disenfranchisement that we’ve ever seen from a governor,” Mr. Mauer said, “and it’s noteworthy that it’s coming in the middle of this term, not the day before he leaves office. So there may be some political heat but clearly he’s willing to take that on, which is quite admirable.”

Advocates who have been working with the governor say they are planning to fan out into Richmond communities Friday afternoon to start registering people. Until now in Virginia, felons were allowed to apply to have their voting rights restored, but the process could be cumbersome and those who have committed violent crimes faced a waiting period. That will be eliminated by Mr. McAuliffe’s action.

“That is a huge deal,” said Tram Nguyen, an executive director of the New Virginia Majority, an advocacy group. “We talk about needing to raise up your voice so that we can impact policy makers, and these people are saying to us, ‘We don’t have a voice, no one is going to listen to us, we don’t even have our right to vote.’ ”

Experts say that with the stroke of his pen, Mr. McAuliffe has allowed convicted felons to begin registering to vote, and that their voting rights cannot be revoked — even if a new governor rescinds the order.

But the move could expose the governor to accusations that he is playing politics; he is a longtime friend of — and top fund-raiser for — Hillary Clinton, the likely Democratic nominee for president, and former President Bill Clinton.

In the interview, Mr. McAuliffe said that he was not acting for political reasons, and that few people outside his immediate staff knew of his plans. He said he had not consulted with Mrs. Clinton or her campaign before making the decision.

The order builds on steps the governor has previously taken to restore voting rights to 18,000 Virginians since the beginning of his term, and he said he believed his authority to issue the decision was “ironclad.”

Professor A. E. Dick Howard of the University of Virginia School of Law, who was the principal draftsman of a revised Constitution adopted by Virginia in 1971, agreed, and said the governor had “ample authority.” But Professor Howard, who advised Mr. McAuliffe on the issue, said the move might well be challenged in court. The most likely argument, he said, is that the governor cannot restore voting rights to an entire class of people all at once.

“I’m assuming that the complaint will be that he has to act one pardon at a time, one person at a time, that he’s not permitted to act wholesale,” Professor Howard said. “I think the language of the Constitution and the theory of the pardoning power all point to the same conclusion — that he can.”

Virginia’s Constitution has prohibited felons from voting since the Civil War; the restrictions were expanded in 1902, as part of a package that included poll taxes and literacy tests.

In researching the provisions, advisers to the governor turned up a 1906 report quoting Carter Glass, a Virginia state senator (and later, a member of Congress who was an author of the 1933 [Glass-Steagall Act](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/g/glass_steagall_act_1933/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) that regulated banks) as saying they would “eliminate the darkey as a political factor in this State in less than five years, so that in no single county of the Commonwealth will there be the least concern felt for the complete supremacy of the white race in the affairs of government.”

Mr. McAuliffe, who took office in 2014 and campaigned to restore voting rights to felons, said that he viewed disenfranchisement as “a remnant of the poll tax” and that he had been “trying to figure out what more I can possibly do.” He has been working with his legal team for months to live up to his campaign promise. His action Friday will not apply to felons released in the future; the governor’s aides say Mr. McAuliffe intends to issue similar orders on a monthly basis to cover more people as they are released.

“People have served their time and done their probation,” Mr. McAuliffe said. “I want you back in society. I want you feeling good about yourself. I want you voting, getting a job, paying taxes. I’m not giving people their gun rights back and other things like that. I’m merely allowing you to feel good about yourself again, to feel like you are a member of society.”

1. Summarize the controversy. What do proponents want to change, specifically? What are the opponent’s reasons for disagreeing?

2. What does “disenfranchisement” mean in the context of this article? What does it refer to and what effect does it have on the tone of the article altogether?

3. What is your opinion on the situation? Should felons ever have their voting rights restored? If not, why not? If so, in what context? Should some receive those rights back, and not others? How should it be decided who does get them back?

4. Write a level 3 question of your own that is brought up because of this article.