Virginia’s Governor Restores Voting Rights for 13,000 Ex-Felons

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After a court ruling, Gov. Terry McAuliffe of Virginia announced that he had restored voting rights to 13,000 former felons, citing his long-held belief in second chances.

Virginia’s governor said on Monday that he had signed papers restoring the voting rights of nearly 13,000 ex-felons, accomplishing on a case-by-case basis what the state’s Supreme Court last month had barred him from doing with a single executive order.

Gov. Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, cast the move as a civil rights victory in a state whose constitutional ban on voting by ex-felons has disenfranchised roughly one in five African-Americans. In a post on Twitter, the governor said, “We will continue to fight to ensure that our fellow citizens are not marginalized forever.”

State Republicans had called Mr. McAuliffe’s effort to restore voting rights a political plot to put more Democrats on the voting rolls. On Monday, Donald J. Trump, campaigning in Fredericksburg, Va., accused Mr. McAuliffe of “getting thousands of violent felons to the voting booth in an effort to cancel out the votes of both law enforcement and crime victims.”

“They are letting people vote in your Virginia election that should not be allowed to vote,” Mr. Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, said.

In fact, however, the governor is empowered by the state’s Constitution to grant ex-felons the right to vote, and earlier studies suggest that most of those
whose rights were restored had committed nonviolent crimes.

Almost all states deny felons the right to vote, but many automatically restore voting rights after a violator has completed a prison term, probation, parole or all three. Virginia is one of four states that permanently strip felons of voting rights unless the governor lifts the prohibition, which Virginia governors had done sparingly.

Only Kentucky and Florida, which also disenfranchise felons for life, have a higher share of African-Americans whose felony convictions deny them the right to vote.

Mr. McAuliffe’s Republican predecessor, Gov. Bob McDonnell, moved to soften the lifetime ban in 2013, ordering that any nonviolent felon who had completed a sentence and paid all fines or restitution be automatically considered for voting-rights restoration.

But Mr. McAuliffe caused a sensation in April when he went well beyond that, signing a sweeping executive order reinstating rights for nearly everyone who had completed prison sentences and met the terms of any supervised release: 206,000 ex-felons in all. Those whose crimes were nonviolent — about eight in 10 — were immediately given the right to cast a ballot; violent ex-felons were barred from voting until three years after successfully completing supervised release.

“I want you back as a full citizen of the commonwealth,” Mr. McAuliffe said then of the ex-felons. “I want you to have a job, I want you paying taxes, and you can’t be a second-class citizen.”

Republicans denounced the move as a transparent effort to help Mr. McAuliffe’s close friend and ally, Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee, in what was likely to be a swing state in the 2016 presidential
A 2014 study by political scientists concluded that ex-felons in a handful of states were much more likely to register as Democrats than as Republicans, although the authors said race and poverty, not criminality, were the likely reasons.

After Republicans sued to block the executive order, Virginia’s Supreme Court ruled last month that Mr. McAuliffe could restore voting rights only on a case-by-case basis rather than with a blanket order. Monday’s announcement of restored rights for nearly 13,000 residents was the beginning of what the governor’s office has said is an effort to address the voting status of all ex-felons.

Officials will address restoration of other ex-felons’ rights in chronological order, starting with those who have been freed from supervision the longest, the governor said.

William Howell, the Republican speaker of the State House and a plaintiff in the lawsuit opposing Mr. McAuliffe’s executive order, said in a written statement that legislators would study the new process for restoring voter rights to ensure that it abides by the Supreme Court’s ruling in July.

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