



Amend Iowa's Constitution to Restore Felon Voting Rights

The Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club supports restoring the voting rights of felons once they have completed their term of incarceration - the time they spend in prison or jail – and probation or parole. Voting rights should be restored even though fines, court costs, restitution, surcharges, and financial penalties have not been paid. Requiring payment of fines, penalties, and costs before being allowed to vote is the equivalent of a poll tax.

The best way of ensuring that is to pass a constitutional amendment that would restore a felon's voting rights once their sentence has been completed. A constitutional amendment requires two votes of the legislature, with each vote separated by a general election. Then the constitutional amendment must be passed by the voters.

Currently felons residing in Iowa who have completed their term of incarceration and probation and parole can vote with exception of those convicted of homicide; this is due to an executive order issued by Governor Kim Reynolds in August, 2020. Those who have been convicted of homicide and have completed their sentences can individually petition the governor and ask that their citizenship rights be restored.

Future governors can override another governor's executive order. We saw that happen to the executive order issued by Governor Tom Vilsack in 2005 that restored voting rights, which was overturned by Governor Terry Branstad in 2011. That is why a constitutional amendment that restores felon voting rights is important.

The Sierra Club cares about making our democracy strong. When everyone votes, we have a government that is more responsive to the people. That's why all citizens should have a right to vote. Michael Brune, Executive Director of the Sierra Club, addressed felon voting rights in "One Planet, One Vote - Protecting our democracy is how we save wild places", which was published in the March/April, 2019, Sierra magazine. Brune wrote, "How can we ensure that everyone who wants to vote can do so? Just as a muscle only gets stronger if you use it, the single most powerful way to protect voting rights is to exercise them. In 2018, voters across the country approved more than a dozen pro-democracy ballot initiatives that, among other reforms, replaced legislative gerrymandering with independent redistricting commissions, implemented same-day and automatic voter registration, and put new restrictions on campaign contributions." Brune continued with, "Encouraging as those results are, we have much more work to do, and the next two years will be crucial to improving how our democracy functions. For the Sierra Club, that work is as important as protecting wild places and promoting clean energy. That's why in 2013, we helped launch the Democracy Initiative, a network of groups committed to getting money out of politics and ensuring that all citizens can exercise their right to vote. This coalition understands that without a healthy democracy, our nation can't make progress on the pressing challenges confronting us. By working together, democratically, we can restore people's faith that ours is a government truly of, by, and for the people—and for the planet too."



What you can do

Contact your state senator and state representative and ask for their support in updating Iowa Constitution to allow felons the right to vote once they have served their time in prison or in jail. Further, restoration of voting rights should not require the person to have fully paid of fines, surcharges, and restitution.