

Activists to Branstad: Keep current voting rights rule

By WILLIAM PETROSKI • bpetroski@dmreg.com • January 4, 2011

A coalition of about 20 activist groups asked Gov.-elect Terry Branstad on Monday not to follow through on a pledge to rescind an executive order that automatically restores voting rights to ex-convicts.

The groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa and the Iowa Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, sent a letter to Branstad expressing support for a statewide policy adopted in 2005. That's when Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack issued a blanket order restoring voting rights to about 50,000 Iowa felons who had completed their criminal sentences.

"We believe that the right to vote is integral to an individual's reentry back into the community," the groups' letter said. "People transitioning out of the criminal justice system are expected to reintegrate themselves fully back into society. This will be made far more difficult if we brand them as second-class citizens."

Branstad aide Tim Albrecht said Monday the incoming Republican governor still intends to rescind Vilsack's executive order. Such action would not affect voting rights already restored.

"Gov. Branstad believes voting rights need to be earned back by fully completing their obligations, including serving the time, paying the fine, court costs and restitution ..." Albrecht said. "The result of Gov. Vilsack's action is a number of additional unpaid court costs and fines."

Ben Stone, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa, said he hopes Branstad will reconsider his plans.

"In the past, it was a difficult process" for an ex-convict to regain voting rights, Stone said. Some ex-offenders became so discouraged by the need to file formal applications through the governor's office that they gave up and quit trying to regain their right to vote, he added.

But if Branstad insists on rescinding Vilsack's executive order, Stone said he hopes the incoming governor will adopt a "user-friendly method" for ex-offenders to regain their voting rights.

Vilsack's action in 2005 was strongly opposed by some Republicans, who saw his move as an effort to add more Democrats to the state's voting rolls. The estimated 50,000 people who regained their rights to vote were seen as disproportionately coming from minority and lower-income groups, meaning they were demographically more likely to vote Democratic than Republican.

The additional Democrat votes were seen as potentially having a huge impact on the outcome of close elections in Iowa, a toss-up state where key elections are often decided by a relatively small number of votes. In the 2004 election, for example, President Bush carried Iowa by about 10,000 votes.

Officials from the American Correctional Association of Alexandria, Va., and the American Probation and Parole Association of Kentucky have also sent letters to Branstad urging him to continue to automatically restore the voting rights of Iowans who have completed probation and parole.

"Bringing people into the political process makes them stakeholders in their communities and encourages them to lead law-abiding lives, thereby decreasing recidivism," wrote James A. Gondles Jr., executive director of the American Correctional Association, a professional group.

Source:

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/201101040405/NEWS10/101040348> [Accessed 1.18.2011].