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Friday, July 22, 2016 Last Update: 7:10 AM PT

## Virginia's Top Court Blocks Bid to Restore Felons' Voting Rights

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(CN) - A divided Virginia Supreme Court on Friday set aside Gov. Terry McAuliffe's executive order restoring the voting rights of more than 200,000 felons, siding with the GOP lawmakers who argued the governor's action was unconstitutional.

In a 4-3 decision, the Supreme Court of Virginia ordered the state to cancel the registrations of the more than 11,000 felons who have signed up to vote since McAuliffe [issued](#) his executive order in April.

The ruling also disallows other rights the governor had restored, including allowing felons to run for public office, serve on a jury and become a notary public.

"Too often in both our distant and recent history, politicians have used their authority to restrict people's ability to participate in our democracy," McAuliffe said in a [statement](#) after he signed the order.

"Today we are reversing that disturbing trend and restoring the rights of more than 200,000 of our fellow Virginians who work, raise families and pay taxes in every corner of our commonwealth," he said

But Republican blanching, arguing the Democratic governor could not restore rights en masse but must consider each former offender's case individually.

Further, they accused McAuliffe of trying to add more minorities to the voting rolls ahead of the November election to help his friend Hillary Clinton win the critical swing state of Virginia for the Democrats.

Nearly 50 percent of those whose rights were restored are black, even though African-Americans make up just about 20 percent of Virginia's population, according to an analysis done by the governor's office.

McAuliffe denied his action was politically motivated, saying he believes that people who served their time deserve a second chance.

But the state Supreme Court rejected that argument Friday, calling it "overstated at best."

Chief Justice Donald Lemons, who wrote the opinion for the court, said the claim that governors can restore rights en masse is "irreconcilable" with the requirement that governors must report to lawmakers the "'particulars of every case' and state his 'reasons' for each pardon."

"This requirement implies a specificity and particularity wholly lacking in a blanket, group pardon of a host of unnamed and, to some extent, still unknown number of convicted felons," Lemons wrote.

In a joint statement issued after the court's ruling was announced, House Speaker William Howell and Senate Majority Leader Thomas Norment said, "Our nation was founded on the principles of limited government and separation of powers. Those principles have once again withstood assault from the executive branch. This opinion is a sweeping rebuke of the governor's unprecedented assertion of executive authority."

McAuliffe said Friday that he will individually sign the orders restoring felons' rights, calling it a "disgrace" that Republicans would try to "deny more than 200,000 of their own citizens the right to vote."

"I remain committed to moving past our Commonwealth's history of injustice to embrace an honest process for restoring the rights of our citizens, and I believe history and the vast majority of Virginians are on our side," the governor said in a statement.



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