

Andy Ellis
Seeking the Green Party nomination for Governor
HB 52
FAV

The Green Party of the United States has included the right of incarcerated people to vote as a platform position for decades. The Maryland Green Party goes further — our bylaws allow people who cannot register to vote due to incarceration to sign an internal document and participate as full decision-making members of the party. We have welcomed incarcerated members for over a decade. For us, this bill reflects a core belief: democracy means everyone, including people behind bars.

HB 52 reflects what we have always argued: the franchise should be expanding, not contracting. Maryland took an important step in 2016 when it restored voting rights immediately upon release rather than requiring completion of parole or probation. This bill takes the next logical step by recognizing that incarceration itself should not be a bar to participation in democracy.

Incarceration is political. Every person sitting in a Maryland prison is there because of policy choices: what to criminalize, how to sentence, how to fund public safety versus public health, how to allocate resources across communities. The people living under those policies should have a say in who makes them. That is basic accountability. When we strip voting rights from incarcerated people, elected officials get to impose consequences on a population with no way to hold them accountable at the ballot box.

The racial dimension makes this even more urgent. Felony disenfranchisement in the United States grew directly out of racial exclusion. Post-Reconstruction legislatures deliberately expanded these laws to target newly enfranchised Black voters. That history echoes in the present: Black Marylanders are incarcerated at dramatically disproportionate rates, which means felony disenfranchisement continues to function as a tool of racial voter suppression, regardless of intent. The communities most harmed by mass incarceration are the same communities losing political representation through disenfranchisement, and each makes the other worse.

The voter hotline provision in HB0052 matters because restoring a right on paper is not enough. People in prison cannot walk into a board of elections office, look up their registration, or ask a poll worker a question. The hotline gives them a way to actually register, get information, and report problems.

Maine and Vermont have never revoked voting rights based on criminal conviction. Washington, D.C. restored this right in 2020. Internationally, many democracies, including Canada, South Africa, and many European democracies, recognize that imprisonment does not extinguish citizenship. Maryland should join them.

I encourage this committee to provide a favorable report on HB0052.