EDITORIAL

Denying the Vote

It has been decades since federal laws overturned the literacy tests and poll taxes that were the most blatant forms of discrimination barring black people from voting in Southern states. But even today, felony disenfranchisement is an enormous obstacle to voting for black people in the Deep South. These laws are the worst in the free world. The process for restoring voting rights for people who have been convicted of crimes can be so byzantine that officials don’t know who is eligible. The confusion bars some eligible voters from the polls for life.

In Alabama, an archaic law strips the right to vote from people convicted of crimes involving “moral turpitude,” without explaining what that is or what crimes are covered. A man who was convicted of a felony for driving under the influence of alcohol, for example, was stripped of his right to vote. When he reapplied for the vote, different agencies gave him contradictory answers, and he was initially prohibited from registering.

An Alabama judge has instructed the Legislature to clear up the confusion by clearly defining what the phrase means. But the problem with the state’s system runs far deeper than that. The Legislature recognized that something was seriously wrong in 2003, when it passed a law streamlining the process of restoration of voting rights for people who have completed their sentences for certain crimes. The expedited system has failed, however, because of foot-dragging and endemic confusion.

The Legislature needs to stop tinkering at the margins of this problem. The only honorable solution is to automatically restore voting rights to Alabamians who have completed their sentences. That’s the only way to take this issue out of the hands of bureaucrats and make amends for one of the most shameful voting rights records in American history.