

Democracy, Who Needs It?

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We do, of course, as do all Democrats and anyone who believes in government of, by, and for the people.

Republicans? Not so much. They believe in government of, by, and for the obscenely rich. And yet however much they pollute our politics with their money, oligarchs like the Koch brothers still get one vote apiece, just like you and me.

One person, one vote. That really grates on the Republican party. That's why they devote so much time devising ways to prevent the "wrong people" from voting.

Actually, I can relate to that – there are plenty of people I'd prefer didn't get to vote, starting with those who routinely vote against their economic interests (and possibly their lives) because they're racists or ignoramuses or both (there's a fair amount of overlap) But that's not how democracy works, and unfortunately there is no more equitable or sensible form of government. To paraphrase Winston Churchill's famous quip, "democracy is the worst form of government . . . except for all the others."

Given the demographics, and the fact that you can't fool all the people all the time, Republicans have learned that preventing the "wrong people" from voting is not always enough. For example, George Bush won Florida twice because of massive voter suppression, but Barrack Obama won it twice despite such voter suppression.

So the second front in the Republican war on democracy is to sabotage it when the voters deliver the "wrong result." The longest playing and most odious example is their crusade to strip health insurance from the 20 million Americans newly insured under the Affordable Care Act.

The most recent "wrong result" occurred last November when 65% of Floridians voted in favor of Amendment 4, which amended the Florida Constitution to restore the franchise to all former felons who had completed "all terms of their sentence including parole or probation." In a blatant and constitutionally suspect denial of the will of the voters, and notwithstanding the clear language of the Amendment, Republicans passed a bill that would prevent former felons from voting until they had paid court-ordered fines.

I'm certain that most voters (I among them) never interpreted the wording of Amendment 4 in that manner or had any idea that Florida assesses fines to criminal defendants for the privilege of being tried in its courts, or that the fines are used to fund the courts but are almost never collected. It should escape no one's notice that a disproportionate percentage of the former felons unable to pay this fine will be people of color. Until it is struck down by the courts as a

thinly veiled “poll tax,” the bill has restored the racist stain that Amendment 4 had removed.

Not surprisingly the bill passed on nearly strict party lines, although in the House one Democratic representative (Elizabeth Fetterhoff) voted for the bill and four others (Irv Slosberg, Clovis Watson, Kristin Jacobs and Kim Daniels) abstained.

<https://legiscan.com/FL/rollcall/S7066/id/858547>;

<https://legiscan.com/FL/rollcall/S7066/id/857885>

So what’s the takeaway? If we want a democracy, we need to work for it. And that’s what Democrat State Attorneys, including our own Dave Aronberg, are doing. According to a recent story in [The Intercept](#), Dave is exploring “a way to allow people with felony records to pay off their obligations to the court through community service.”

Miami-Dade County State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle has developed a plan to help people who are unable to pay their fines but otherwise eligible. And State Attorney Andrew Warren has plans to set up a “rocket docket” to modify the sentences en masse.

I proposed at a recent DEC meeting that George Soros be approached to pay fines for all those unable to do so themselves. It was suggested in response that Soros is constantly being asked for funding, but it seems to me that there could be no better use for his money. Last, but far from least, the ACLU has filed a lawsuit claiming that the Republican law is an unconstitutional poll tax.

Stay tuned.