

Saying “Yes” to Second Chances and Democracy: Florida’s Voter Restoration Amendment

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Voting is dangerous. The simple act of indicating one’s preference for any given candidate, political party, or choice in a referendum can reshape political landscapes. As the most basic of democratic rights, the franchise is essential to the public’s ability to participate in the political process. This is why the disenfranchisement of former felons in Florida is an extreme threat to democracy.

Currently, 1.6 million Floridians — or 1 in 10 — cannot vote due to a past felony conviction. Although people often associate felonies with murder and other violent crimes, felonies are simply crimes that result in a prison sentence of one year and a day or longer. They include nonviolent crimes like drug possession, driving with a suspended driver’s license or even the failure to pay off too many traffic tickets. As a result, many Floridians are excluded from our political system. The notion that the right to vote is a privilege that can be permanently revoked without a second chance, rather than a right, is antithetic to democracy, which both allows and demands that people are empowered to shape political decisions and their lives.

People in neglected and marginalized communities who are least able to protect themselves in the criminal justice system suffer the brunt of disenfranchisement. Moreover, bearing in mind the racist foundations of the criminal justice system — from Black Codes to the War on Drugs — the disenfranchisement of former felons in Florida disproportionately affects people of color; this has been so since the state constitution was amended shortly after the Civil War to intentionally prevent the newly freed slaves from voting. Currently, former felons can petition for clemency, but under Gov. Scott this is rarely granted, which is hardly a surprise since newly restored voters register as Democrats by a wide margin. To counter this biased democracy-harming agenda, the voting rights restoration movement in Florida is attempting to amend the state constitution to automatically grant former felons, excluding murderers and sex offenders, the right to vote upon completion of their sentences (including parole and probation). Similar provisions apply in more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of states in the United States (and in Vermont and Maine, felons can vote while in prison). Headed by both former felons and activists, the movement has been changing the narrative about voting and disenfranchisement.

A total of over 1 million verified and unverified petition signatures have been gathered in favor of a 2018 referendum on the amendment. To guarantee that the state-mandated requirement of 766,200 verified signatures for the amendment to be placed upon the ballot is met by February 1, we all need to participate by getting even more signatures. Signing the petition yourself and reaching out to your friends, families and communities are the best ways to get support for the petition. Then, once the amendment is on the 2018 ballot, we must bring awareness of it to as many Floridians as possible. The amendment must receive at least 60 percent of votes in favor to pass. Since voter turnout is generally less in midterm elections than in other elections, encouraging people to simply get out and vote in 2018 will be another important component of getting the voting rights amendment passed. With these goals in mind, let us all come together throughout the state in support of this amendment and bring Florida and our country one step closer to being a true democracy.

