

Dear Florida residents,

In 2018, Florida voters approved the passing of Amendment 4 to the Florida constitution, finally granting those with felony convictions the right to vote after they have completed all parole or probation. In response to this, Governor Ron DeSantis signed Senate Bill 7066 in 2019 that prohibits convicted felons from voting unless they pay off all existing legal financial obligations. This bill is not only unjust in the way it prevents a certain population of Floridians from voting in major elections, but it is also vague in its description of who the bill applies to, causing many past felons who still have legal fees they are unaware of to vote anyways, unknowing of the fact that they are breaking the law. This leads to unsuspecting citizens getting charged as the act of illegal voting is a third-degree felony and is punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. Despite the consequences of breaking this law being major, it does not prohibit individuals from registering to vote, it only punishes them after the fact.

The effects of this bill's passing are detrimental to Florida citizens' lives today. In March of 2022, several previously convicted felons in Alachua County were charged for voting in the 2020 election while they still had outstanding legal fines, despite being told that they were eligible to vote (Ilvento & Lugo). Of the 9 former felons that were charged, about half of them registered to vote while serving in county jail, though none of them were in jail at the time of the election (Ilvento & Lugo). One of the men charged, John Rivers, claimed that an individual who said they were an employee of the Supervisor of Elections office helped and encouraged inmates to vote in the Alachua County jail. These inmates were never informed that they had outstanding financial obligations, or that they were required to pay them to be eligible to vote. They all were under the impression that if the elections office was sending individuals to help them register, they must have this right when they are released from jail. Despite the passing of Senate Bill 7066, the employees from the elections office also seemed oblivious to the laws regarding the required payment of legal fees. None of the employees who registered these felons were charged despite their actions leading inmates to believe that they were guaranteed this right.

This system of punishing former convicted felons through financial obligations created by the passing of Bill 7066 is unjust because of its discriminatory intentions. In addition to Alachua County, other counties in Florida are under investigation for similar situations regarding voter fraud. These counties include Duval, Gadsden, and Leon, all being mostly democratic areas (Ilvento & Lugo). This bill seems to be targeting those who may not vote in the same way the leaders of Florida may want them to. This correlation is especially noteworthy considering that Governor DeSantis is a republican and this bill is primarily affecting those who vote on the other end of the political spectrum and is preventing additional votes from being counted that would work against the primarily conservative values of Florida Senate.

We can also see evidence of racial discrimination with this form of disenfranchisement. According to The Sentencing Project, African Americans are disenfranchised at a rate that is 3.5 times higher than the non-African American population. One in 19 African Americans who are of voting age are disenfranchised, most of which are due to outstanding legal charges (Budd). The Governor of Florida's effort to take away the right to vote from those who are unable to pay off their fees is simultaneously working to oppress a specific group of voters, not allowing them to express their values in the polls.

This bill also shows evidence of discrimination based on class, as only those who could afford to pay their fees could technically vote, defeating the purpose of Amendment 4 for many former felons. These people could enjoy their restored rights for less than one year before something had to be done to restrict them from their constitutional right to vote. This law is also unjust to Floridians because of the lack of a system in place to keep track of felons' legal financial obligations. Despite this now being a requirement to vote, there is no organization tracking the fines and fees across Florida's courts nor does the state consistently record data on legal financial obligations (Brennan Center). The lack of a central system to acknowledge these fines is why these formerly convicted felons are voting freely, unaware that they have committed a crime. If the state was serious about the complications of this bill, there would be procedures to notify those who could not vote or prevent them from registering completely.

Floridians unable to vote due to past felony convictions



Out of the 1.15 million Floridians who are disenfranchised due to felony convictions, over 80% are unable to vote due to unpaid court fines

Considering the unjust complications that come with this bill, a fair solution to this issue of disenfranchisement would be getting rid of this bill completely. Because it entirely contradicts the previously passed amendment, passing a bill in Florida congress that would reverse the effects of Senate Bill 7066 would be the best way to end this discrimination against former convicted felons. One way to encourage this motion would be to support legislators in Florida who believe in this cause and have the power to introduce this issue to congress. This can be done by researching your Florida legislators and discovering their views on voter rights, looking into if they have ever discussed this particular issue before.

Another way to solve this problem is to petition locally for this change. This can be done by creating a ballot initiative and getting those who agree with this proposed change to help sign a preposition for a new law. You can also help this cause by spreading the word about this issue. This particular case of disenfranchisement may not be known to everyone in Florida as it applies to a certain group of people. If more Floridians knew about the bill and knew that it is currently getting people arrested for voting in the last presidential election, they may be inclined to speak out as well.

Thank you,

Nagham Mashraqi

Works Cited.

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