

Voting Rights for Returning Citizens

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As you may know, Florida is currently a battle grounds of the fight for voting rights for returning citizens. This fight began after the historic passing of Amendment 4 in 2018.

What is Amendment 4

In the United States, we have a democratic government. The highlight of this style of governance is the ability to make your voice heard by voting. Voting rights have gone on a roller coaster during the past 150 years. Over time each population was giving rights to vote from Blacks in the 1870s to Women in the 1920s. One group; however, has been denied their ability to vote for many years, returning citizens (felons). In 2018, Florida amended its constitution to allow ex-felons the chance to vote again with the passage of amendment 4.

The problem of the disenfranchised group in Florida who do not have their right to vote, ex-felons, needs to be addressed. Returning citizens are disproportionately minorities and have slowly crept into a modern Jim Crow era (Alexander,2012). These people may not have been given the same opportunities as their nonminority peers and are now labeled as felons. Despite them completing their sentence and described as "reformed," their rights are not returned. They must wear a badge of dishonor for the rest of their life. Amendment 4 seeks to recover some of those rights.

A significant barrier for voting rights is education and awareness. They may be aware they can have their rights returned, but without proper and appropriate support, they find themselves labeled as offenders once again. They deserve advocates to help them with their voting knowledge, support, and education.

Florida's Voting Restoration Amendment (Amendment 4) passed in November 2018 by a 65% vote. The amendment was initially introduced by Sen. Jeff Brandes and advocated for by Floridan's for a Fair

Democracy. It was supported by many and made its way through the House and Senate as HB 281 and SB 7066 respectively (Ballotpedia.org).

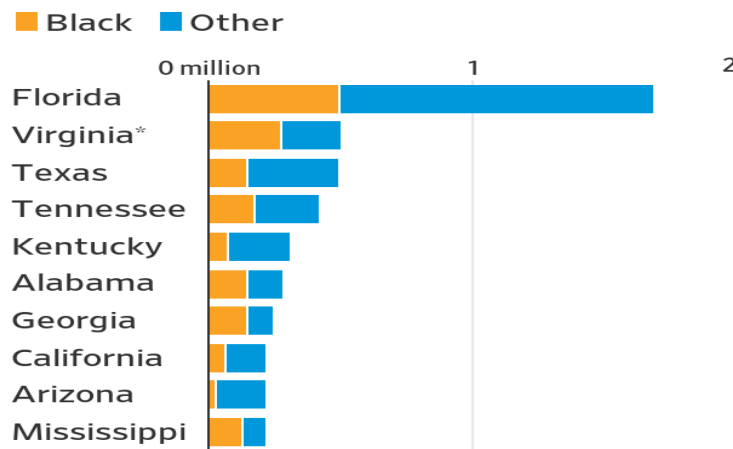
The amendment allows people who have paid their debt to society to earn back their right to vote. The people behind this Amendment are nonpartisan civic and faith organizations working with men and women who served time and are now putting their lives back together (aclufl.org). Currently, the amendment is on hold; there is confusion about fulfilling all the requirements. Currently, a felon must pay all their restitution to be eligible to vote.

The Facts About Voting Rights

The chart below (*Figure 1*), courtesy of Kamp and Campo-Flores at the Wall Street Journal (2017) highlights the States with the highest amount of disenfranchised people. As noted, Florida has nearly three times, and this is the number of potential new voters who will be allowed to vote in the State: 1.6 million Floridians would be eligible to vote pending the outcome of amendment 4 controversy surrounding the 'poll tax.' It is recommended that if a person is not aware of their status to reach out to a local official.

No Vote

States with the highest number of people disenfranchised due to felony convictions



*Figure predates Gov. Terry McAuliffe's large-scale restoration of voting rights to former felons.
Source: The Sentencing Project
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Figure 1

The following are more facts about the disenfranchised population in the State of Florida:

- 6.1 million Americans cannot vote because of a felony conviction. Floridians account for 1.6 million, or 25 percent, of the population of people who have permanently lost their right to vote. (aclufl.org)
- 1 of every 13 African Americans has lost their voting rights due to felony disenfranchisement laws, vs. 1 in every 56 non-black voters. (aclufl.org)
- Only four states, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, and Virginia, permanently revoke a person's right to vote if they have a felony conviction. (aclufl.org)
- Restricting voting rights because of the inability to pay is essentially a “poll tax.”
- In Oct 2019, a judge passed a preliminary injunction saying the state cannot deny a person the right to vote solely because they lack the means to pay their financial obligations that Amendment 4 and SB 7066 requires of them. (Orlando News)

- Ron DeSantis is currently trying to get U.S. District Judge Robert Hinkle’s ruling overturned, reporting they have a “financial obligation,” that should be addressed before voting.
- If you were convicted of Murder or a Felony Sex Offense, your voting rights will never be restored.

Getting Involved

Many agencies in Florida have focused their sights on assisting returning citizens with their right to vote. None more prominent than The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC). This grass roots group run and comprised of returning citizens has many opportunities to help.

The largest need right now is financial donations to help pay off the fines. FRRC is actively seeking and in need of contributions.

See link for details: <https://floridarrc.com/>

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