

Florida legislatures pass draconian bill restricting voting rights

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The Florida House of Representatives and Florida Senate, both dominated by Republicans, approved new legislation last Thursday that would place restrictions on drop boxes and the ability of residents to vote by mail.

The bill passed in the Senate with a vote of 23-17 and the House with a vote of 77-40 and has been sent to Governor Ron DeSantis for his signature. The Democrats have criticized the bill only from a racist viewpoint, saying it is designed to lessen the impact of black voters in the state, but not raising the broader anti-democratic content of its anti-working-class character.

Under the new legislation, any resident who wishes to vote through the mail must make a request in person or in writing to their supervisor of elections, and this request is only sufficient through the end of the calendar year of the next regularly scheduled general election. This means that the resident has to renew their request for every general election. The supervisor additionally has to keep records of when requests are made, when ballots are delivered to mail carriers, and when the ballots are received again by the supervisor. The supervisor must also verify that the voter's signature matches that in the registration books.

According to the US Elections Project, over 45 percent of mail ballots returned during the 2020 general election were from registered Democrats while a little over 31 percent were received from registered Republicans. The in-person vote was almost an exact inversion: Republicans received 45 percent to the Democrats' 32 percent. Those with no party affiliation contributed between 20 and 22 percent of the votes across the board.

One of the other aspects of voting that has been restricted in the legislation is the use of drop boxes and volunteers who provide assistance to voters. The person

providing assistance must take an oath where they affirm that they are not the employer, agent of the employer, or an officer or agent of the union of the voter, and also that they did not solicit the voter at a polling place or drop box location. The oath has to be sworn and signed in front of an election official who must also sign the declaration.

Drop boxes must be designated by election supervisors at least 30 days before an election, and once this designation is made, it cannot be moved or changed. On each day of early voting, all drop boxes must be emptied, and if any drop box is left accessible outside of early voting hours, the supervisor is subject to a civil penalty of \$25,000. Earlier versions of the legislation banned the use of ballot drop boxes altogether.

Under the new legislation, applicants for voter registration are required to provide an address of legal residence, which means that homeless individuals are automatically barred from voting. Any applicant or resident who wishes to update their voter registration information must provide their driver's license or state-issued identification card number, and the address registered with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles must be consistent. The resident may alternatively give the last four digits of their social security number, but officials must verify the nonexistence of a driver's license or Florida identification number in this event.

The legislation also makes it more difficult for "third-party voter registration organizations" to register new voters. This section of the bill is designed to limit the operations of organizations that assist residents with the voter registration process, such as those prevalent on college campuses.

The organization in question must provide names and

permanent addresses of each “registration agent” registering persons to vote in Florida. The organization also must deliver registration applications as a fiduciary for the applicant within 14 days after the applicant completes their application. If these requirements are not met, the organization can be fined up to \$1,000 for each application that is received late depending on where and how it was filed and whether the delay was done “willfully.” The original language of the bill limited the 14-day time window to 48 hours.

The legislation carries on the requirement that any non-party-affiliated candidate running for office must obtain a certain number of signatures to be placed on the ballot. For instance, an independent presidential candidate must submit a petition that contains signatures equal to 1 percent of the total registered voters in the state. In 2020, this number was 132,781. The same rule applies to “minor” parties that are not affiliated with a national party. The individual or the party must also pay the expenses of election officials. This all happens before the petition is forwarded to the secretary of state, who actually determines whether the candidate is eligible for ballot placement. This is the reason why Florida residents do not see candidates for the Socialist Equality Party on their election ballots.

A final provision made in SB 90 receiving a lot of attention in the corporate media is a limitation placed on the “solicitation” of voters at polling places. This includes “seeking or attempting to seek any vote, fact, opinion, or contribution; distributing or attempting to distribute any political campaign material, leaflet, or handout ... and giving or attempting to give any item to a voter.” The concern here is over whether volunteers can give water and food to voters standing in long lines.

The passing of SB 90 in Florida is part of a larger move by Republicans across the United States to suppress voting. In March, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed a voting law that similarly imposes restrictions on voting access, increases identification requirements, reduces voting hours, and restricts mail-in voting. These bills are part of the new offensive by Republicans following former President Donald Trump’s baseless claims that the Democrats and Joe Biden stole the 2020 election.

A spokesperson for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis told reporters that DeSantis will sign the bill to “ensure that Florida remains a national leader in election

security, integrity, and transparency.” DeSantis is being considered as a contender for the 2024 Republican nomination for president, due in part to his support for these draconian measures.

Democrats have responded both in Georgia and in Florida by denouncing these laws as the rise of the “new Jim Crow,” portraying the issue in purely racial terms, but have made no serious attempt to oppose their passing. In Georgia, Democrats have channeled opposition into pleading with corporations such as Coca-Cola, Home Depot and Delta Airlines to pressure the state government. Marc Elias, a Democratic lawyer leading the charge in Georgia, tweeted last Thursday: “These voter suppression laws are targeted at Black, Brown and young voters.”

While a larger proportion of black and Hispanic voters are indeed registered as Democrats, the largest number of registered Democrats are white. Based on 2018 statistics from the James Madison Institute, 28 percent of whites—approximately 2.3 million people—in Florida were registered as Democrats. Among blacks, 80 percent—approximately 1.4 million people—were registered as Democrats. Among Hispanics, 39 percent, or about 821,000 people, were registered as Democrats.

The fact that Democrats oppose SB 90 and other voter suppression bills purely from a racist viewpoint shows that there is no constituency in that party for a genuine defense of democratic rights. Workers and young people must oppose these draconian measures independently of the Democrats by rooting their opposition in a socialist program that takes power out of the hands of the billionaires and their representatives in both big business parties.



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