

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has 20 people arrested for voting in the 2020 presidential election

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The election police of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis arrested and charged 20 people for allegedly voting in the 2020 presidential election illegally. The move is an attempt at bolstering the “Big Lie” of Donald Trump and the Republican Party of a stolen election and justifying the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol aimed at overturning the election.

Thursday’s charges are the first major public action from the Office of Election Crimes and Security, a police force DeSantis created earlier this year dedicated solely to pursuing voter fraud and other supposed election “crimes.” The governor’s prosecutorial actions are both a political appeal to Trump’s far-right base by fueling the false claims of widespread vote rigging and an attack against the working class and voting rights through the most anti-democratic and repressive measures.

The policing unit was part of Senate Bill (SB) 524, a voting law package DeSantis signed in April adding severe restrictions, including requiring voter rolls to be reviewed annually and updated, sharpening ID requirements and increasing penalties for violations of election laws.

The elections crime unit is presided over by the Florida Department of State, with its main focus being reviewing fraud allegations and conducting preliminary investigations. Already existing state law allowed the governor to appoint officers to investigate violations of election law but did not require him to do so.

With SB 524, DeSantis is now required to appoint a group of special officers from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement tasked with pursuing election law violations. The election crimes unit drastically undermines the authority of local prosecutors in handling such cases, a testament to DeSantis’ growing tyrannical grip over local law enforcement activities of all kinds.

At a campaign-style event in Fort Lauderdale, DeSantis declared that the 20 people charged had been previously convicted of murder or a felony sexual offense and were therefore exempt from a constitutional amendment that restores voting rights to some felons. Those arrested came from five different counties: Hillsborough (St. Petersburg), Orange (Orlando), Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade.

The charges levied against each voter included voting as an unqualified elector and false affirmation. Most of them were charged with a third-degree felony, which can result in up to \$5,000 in fines and up to five years in prison.

“They did not go through any process, they did not get their rights restored, and yet they went ahead and voted anyways,” DeSantis said

in front of right-wing supporters. “That is against the law, and now they’re gonna pay the price for it.”

Voting with past felony convictions

All of those arrested had registered and voted in the 2020 elections while having past felony convictions. They assumed they qualified to vote due to a constitutional amendment approved in 2018 which restored the voting rights of Floridians with felony convictions after they completed all terms of their sentence, including parole or probation.

Florida Amendment 4, however, does not apply to those convicted of murder or sexual offenses, and they would continue to be permanently barred from voting unless approved by the governor on a case-by-case basis and through a cabinet vote restoring their voting rights. According to testimony from those arrested, many of them were unaware that they did not qualify under Amendment 4.

Those arrested noted that their county tax collector’s office had not notified them that they were unqualified to vote, and they had faced no issue registering. Gerri Karmer, chief communications officer for Hillsborough’s Elections Office, noted that the elections office was notified by state officials in late 2021 and early 2022 that the voters had felony convictions and their rights were not restored, as part of a regular process.

Although the county elections office makes sure registration forms are filled out correctly, Karmer said, it is not the election office’s role to verify the information but rather to submit it to the state for review.

One of the 20 charged described the strong-arm and intimidating tactics of police agents leading up to the arrest. One person said she found a Florida Department of Law Enforcement business card in her door frame a few weeks prior to her arrest, and when she called the number on it, the officer told her they found something fraudulent on her account. When the officers came to her job and asked if she had voted in 2020, she said yes and before long she found herself in handcuffs Thursday morning.

The establishment of the Office of Election Crime and Security last year coincided with the signing of SB 90, an omnibus voter suppression bill that authorized major restrictions on voting rights, focusing on in particular mail-in balloting and election workers. These were the two targets of the fascistic conspiracy theories of Trump and his

fellow coup plotters, who alleged that both played a part in the former president's electoral defeat.

The restoration of voting rights for convicted felons was passed alongside several amendments in recent years through ballot initiatives, with many of them having been opposed by the state legislature's Republican majority.

Florida's right-wing legislature introduced bill HJR 61 last year, raising the threshold to alter the state constitution from 60 percent of ballots cast to a full two-thirds, or nearly 67 percent of all votes.

Another bill passed was HB 699, which restricts the ability of Political Action Committees (PAC) to gather enough signatures to place proposed constitutional amendments on the ballot by placing a donation cap of \$3,000 on PACs that are sponsoring proposed constitutional amendments.

Both laws came in response to popular support among Floridians for improved voting rights towards convicted felons, the gradual hiking of the state's minimum wage and the legalization of medical marijuana. These measures are all deemed impermissible by corporations that want to keep workers impoverished, ultra-right evangelical groups, racists, police and agencies that enforce hated anti-drug laws, and by the Republican Party more generally.

The "Stop W.O.K.E. Act" and freedom of speech

The assault on voting rights in Florida has corresponded with other anti-democratic statutes DeSantis has signed in recent months targeting education and historical teaching. One of them, the "Stop W.O.K.E Act," has served as part of a crusade to suppress free speech and conceal historical struggles against inequality in the name of preempting the influence of so-called "woke ideology" in schools and workplaces.

In one of the three lawsuits challenging the Stop WOKE Act, Tallahassee US District Judge Mark Walker ruled on Thursday that the law was unconstitutional, violating the First Amendment and impermissibly vague. Walker also refused to issue a stay that would keep the law in effect during any appeal by the state.

The suit against the law was filed by Clearwater-based Honeyfund.com and others, claiming their free speech rights were being curtailed because the law infringes on company training programs stressing diversity, inclusion, elimination of bias and prevention of workplace harassment.

Although DeSantis' office has not officially responded to the ruling, the governor reiterated his fascistic political ambitions at two campaign-style rallies Friday. The first was for Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano, and the second, in Youngstown, Ohio, was for Republican Senate hopeful J.D. Vance.

Both events were organized by the reactionary student organization Turning Point Action. "We must fight the woke in our schools," DeSantis declared to a cheering audience in Pennsylvania. "We must fight the woke in our businesses. We must fight the woke in government agencies. We can never ever surrender to woke ideology. And I'll tell you this, the state of Florida is where woke goes to die."

DeSantis celebrated as victories his elimination of mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic in schools. At one point he directed the Florida Board of Education to dock the salaries of school board members and reduce overall funding to cash-strapped counties for

defying his ban on mask wearing on K-12 campuses. He also touted his ban on "vaccine passports," a reference to proof of vaccination required in some other areas of the country for entry in enclosed spaces.

He also spoke on his recent move against Hillsborough County State Attorney and Democrat Andrew Warren, who was suspended and effectively fired by DeSantis for opposing the governor's far-right assault on abortion rights and anti-LGBTQ policies.

The firing of Warren exemplified the authoritarian strivings of DeSantis, who has become a Republican hopeful for the 2024 presidential election. The governor reportedly took action against the state attorney for signing a letter alongside prosecutors nationwide pledging not to prosecute people for violating abortion restrictions or a law prohibiting gender-affirming care for minors.

The responses of state Democrats have ranged from complete fecklessness to lending a craven olive branch to the state's Republican Party apparatus in a bid to oust DeSantis in this mid-term elections. In a recent MSN interview, Florida Agriculture Commissioner and Democrat Nikki Fried, who is running for governor, attacked her primary challenger Charlie Crist from the right for failing to pull over "moderate" voters against the Republicans in the 2014 governor's race.

Fried then lauded herself for receiving more Republican votes "than any Democrat has ever received." When asked whether she was willing to approve the same reactionary bills that have been spearheaded by the Republicans in recent years, including the historic anti-abortion law passed this year limiting the procedure to before 15 weeks, the commissioner commended Republican legislators for their cooperation during her three-year tenure as agriculture secretary and their approval of her department's budgets.

In a particularly revealing remark, Fried said that there was an opportunity to "work across the aisles and get things accomplished." She then appealed to the Republicans by vilifying DeSantis, saying that the party can go back to "just being conservative" with the incumbent out of office. This presentation all but provides a political pardon for the fascistic policymakers and operatives that dominate the Republican apparatus who have propelled the far-right legal rampage throughout the state.



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