

Videos made public of Florida police arresting workers for voting “illegally”

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Newly released body camera footage recorded by local police in Hillsborough County, Florida, captured residents being arrested in August of this year for allegedly casting illegal ballots in the 2020 elections. The shocking videos, released by the *Tampa Bay Times*, testifies to the cynical and anti-democratic political maneuvering of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis just weeks ahead of the November vote.

The arrests were carried out by a new policing unit set up under elections crime legislation, Senate Bill (SB) 524, that went into effect this year. The 20 people arrested are being charged with voter fraud for violating a state law that does not allow people convicted of murder or felony sex offenses to automatically vote after they complete their sentence.

The new Office of Election Crimes and Security, a police force dedicated solely to pursuing electoral “fraud,” alongside local law enforcement, made the arrests. The timing of the arrests is clearly political, since it took place nearly two years after the alleged “crime,” in the final weeks before the midterm election in which DeSantis is a candidate.

The *Times* and *Miami Herald* obtained the footage through public record requests, with the *Times* making public the footage of three of the 20 arrests on its website Tuesday.

As the harrowing videos confirm, none of the voters indicted for their alleged “crimes” even knew they were committing an offense when they voted. The arrests, trumpeted by the far-right governor, are literally one in a million: 20 cases of purported “fraud” in a state with a population of 21 million.

Nonetheless, DeSantis and other Trump-style fascist demagogues will cite these cases of “election fraud” to bolster the bogus claims that the 2020 election was rigged and that Trump is the rightful US

president.

One of the supposed “election criminals,” Tony Patterson, was angered and in disbelief when officers handcuffed him at his home for “voter fraud.” One of the officers told Patterson that he was being seized for “voting when you’re not supposed to” because of his prior sex offense convictions. Patterson, visibly distraught, declared “this happened years ago” and “Why now? Why me?”

Officers also contemptuously referred to Patterson as the “lowest kind there is” and when pressed by the defendant on why he was being arrested now for voting two years ago, one said, “I don’t know.” The contrived nature of the prosecutions was captured when one of the officers received a phone call and, while briefly discussing Patterson’s case, confessed that he had “never seen these charges before in my entire life.”

Another of those arrested, Nathan Hart, can be heard on a sheriff’s audio recording explaining how he came to register and vote in the election cycle with his legal status unbeknownst to him. Hart had been encouraged by someone at the “driver’s license place” to vote in March 2020. Since Hart’s probation had ended a month earlier, the unidentified person said he was eligible to vote and could do so if cleared by the state.

Despite a 2018 constitutional amendment that restored the right to vote for more than a million felons in Florida, the amendment excluded those convicted of murder or sexual offences. The legislation enacted by the Republican-controlled state legislature and signed into law by DeSantis was an effort to curtail as much as possible the rights restored in the amendment. The result was a registration process riddled with contradictions.

The registration forms contained language that many voters admitted was too confusing when determining if

particular felons were eligible to vote. Court cases arising from the new law did not clarify whether a former felon, who still owed money arising from federal convictions, or those in other states qualified to vote by satisfying the legal requirement that they had paid all their court fines and fees and demonstrated completion of “all terms of [their] sentence.”

Other recent actions by the DeSantis administration in relation to voting rights provide evidence of the politically motivated and entirely hypocritical character of the prosecutions of these unfortunate individuals.

DeSantis signed an executive order last week easing the voter rules for voters in Lee, Charlotte and Sarasota counties, all areas that suffered devastating losses in human life and property from Hurricane Ian as a result of DeSantis and the government’s disastrous lack of preparedness. These changes are undoubtedly justified but are limited to the three counties, all Republican strongholds populated largely by conservative, affluent voters.

According to DeSantis the decision to accommodate only three counties was “based on the collective feedback of the Supervisors of Elections across the state and at the written requests of the Supervisors of Elections.” The governor nor anyone from his office has yet to explain why locations like central Florida’s Orange County, a heavily Democratic-leaning area including the city of Orlando, received no such exemptions in spite of the fact its residents saw extreme flooding from Ian which has left many displaced and hundreds of millions in damage.

Although thousands of people saw their homes severely damaged or totally leveled from the storm without reimbursement, and many remain packed in overcrowded shelters and face the threat of COVID-19 infection, DeSantis has utilized the social catastrophe as an occasion to employ brazen vote-rigging tactics.

All of governor’s accommodations in the three heavily Republican counties, including the ability to vote early and send in mail-in ballots, were the same procedures DeSantis lambasted in 2021 as opportunities for vote-rigging and other irregularities. These were said to justify the passage and signing of SB 90, a voter suppression bill that severely restricts mail-in balloting, among other anti-democratic measures.

The prosecutions for “voter fraud” have the same geographical bias. Virtually all of the 20 residents, who are charged with voter fraud from DeSantis’ inquisitorial prosecutions and others who have faced stepped up repression from the enforcement of bogus voter restrictions, hail from poorer counties around Orlando, Tampa-St. Petersburg and Jacksonville, where Democratic candidates usually win by sizeable margins.

The cynical voter prosecutions are in line with DeSantis’ fascistic campaign to whip up the Republican’s far-right base in the run-up to his reelection and possible nomination for Republican president. Last month, DeSantis had 50 migrants, mostly Venezuelans and Colombians, deported to Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, without any notice as part of a “relocation program to transport illegal immigrants to sanctuary destinations,” according to his office.

The sheer brutality of the action was expressed in the refugees not knowing where they were being taken, having to travel without language accommodations and were left stranded on the island once they arrived. Some revealed they had been lied to about receiving jobs and housing.



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