

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis uses police to intimidate abortion petition signers

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Over the last week, voters in Florida have reported that plainclothes officers equipped with detailed dossiers have visited their homes to question them over signing a petition to place an abortion amendment on the ballot this November.

Amendment 4, which is backed by major Democratic Party groups, seeks to overturn a six-week abortion ban that was signed into law by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis earlier this year after he dropped out of the Republican presidential primary. Current polling suggests the measure has the support of a majority of voters but it is unclear if it will pass the necessary 60 percent threshold to be enshrined in the state's constitution.

In a bid to block the measure and discourage likely Democratic voters, DeSantis is using various state agencies to threaten petition signers, invalidate signatures, and spread disinformation about the measure. These police-state methods are part of a broad anti-democratic and authoritarian campaign to depress voter turnout, help ex-president Donald Trump and Republican Senator Rick Scott win the state, and fuel Trump's "stolen election" lies.

According to a report in the *Tampa Bay Times* published on September 6, Isaac Menasche, a resident of Lee County, Florida, told the paper a cop visited his home last week to question him over the petition he signed last year.

"I'm not a person who is going out there protesting for abortion," Menasche told the *Tampa Bay Times*. "I just felt strongly and I took the opportunity when the person asked me, to say yeah, I'll sign that petition."

Menasche told the *Times* that last week, a plainclothes officer who appeared at his door had a copy of his driver's license and other documents that had personal identifying information on them.

After being harassed by the cops, Menasche wrote on Facebook that, "The experience left me shaken. What troubled me was he had a folder on me containing my personal information—about 10 pages. I saw a copy of my drivers license and copy of the petition I signed. It was obvious to me that a significant effort was exerted to determine if indeed I had signed the petition."

Another Lee County voter, Becky Castellanos, told the *Tampa Bay Times* that Florida Department of Law Enforcement Officer Gary Negrinelli appeared at her door last week to question her about a family member who had signed the petition, warning that they could be a "victim of fraud."

Castellanos confirmed with her family member that they did indeed sign the petition and that no fraud had been committed. Castellanos told the *Times* that she felt threatened by the police and that she was "surprised but not surprised" that the state would expend resources to attack democratic rights.

"It didn't surprise me that they were doing something like this to try to debunk these petitions to get it taken off of the ballot," she said, adding that "if it was up to the State of Florida abortion would be illegal."

This is not the first time the DeSantis administration has used police violence and intimidation against his political enemies. In the first year of COVID-19 pandemic, DeSantis sent police to raid the home of COVID-19 whistleblower Rebekah Jones. The former Florida Department of Health data scientist was fired earlier that year for refusing to manipulate data to align with the push by DeSantis and the ruling class to "reopen the economy."

In a press conference Monday, DeSantis defended setting the police on Floridians exercising their democratic rights. "This whole thing with the petitions, there is a lot of seedy activity that goes on," said DeSantis. "These people come in from out of state."

We've tried to do reforms to police this, but I think there was a lot of things going on that wasn't right.

"So, that is going to be investigated and I think that they have verified fraudulent activity already. But anything that they find, uh, you know, is going to be pursued."

Speaking to a room full of Republicans at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, Florida on Saturday, DeSantis delivered a fascist tirade against the amendment, saying the measure was "underwritten by people like George Soros and other organs of the political left" and that it "should have never been approved to be on this ballot by the Florida Supreme Court. They made a horrendous decision."

DeSantis attacked Republicans who have yet to publicly oppose the amendment saying it is, "untenable to just sit here and let George Soros run amendments in our state and not be willing to stand up and say no. Not on our watch. That's the least you can do as Republicans."

In addition to threatening police visits, DeSantis is seeking to block the amendment by invalidating previously certified signatures. Florida Secretary of State Cord Byrd has ordered election supervisors in multiple counties to gather and submit some 36,000 petition forms that were previously verified by Byrd's office some seven months ago.

The *Times* reported that supervisors in Hillsborough, Orange, Palm Beach, Osceola, Alachua and Broward counties had received the requests from Bryd's office, which one 16-year supervisor characterized as "entirely unprecedented."

Wendy Sartory Link, an elections supervisor in Palm Beach County, told NBC affiliate WPTV News that the Department of State was requesting her office gather 17,000 petition signatures ahead of the election to check for fraud. Link told the outlet the request was "highly unusual."

In addition to placing onerous request on election supervisors and ordering police visits to petition signers, the DeSantis administration also published a web page on the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration advocating against the abortion ballot measure. The page, which was created with taxpayer dollars, claims falsely that the referendum would eliminate "parental consent" and lead to "unregulated and unsafe abortions." Later on it warns, "We must keep Florida from becoming an abortion tourism destination state."

The police-state campaign against the referendum in

Florida spearheaded by DeSantis is part of a nationwide campaign by the Republican Party to attack voting rights for millions of people and institute a presidential dictatorship.

At his press conference Monday, in addition to defending sending the police after petition signers, DeSantis regurgitated Republican lies that Democratic politicians were purposely facilitating mass immigration in order to rig elections in their favor.

"Some of these cities have registered non-citizens to vote in the elections ... you've had a massive open border and deliberately bringing people in and dropping them in certain communities, which you just can't handle that type of influx. So there is a lot to answer for I think."

The inability of the Democratic Party to defend the democratic rights of the population is exemplified in their response to DeSantis' authoritarian campaign in Florida. More than three days after the voters reported being harassed, neither President Joe Biden nor Vice President Kamala Harris have issued a statement denouncing the DeSantis and defending the petitioners' democratic rights.

This is not surprising. While campaigning as the defenders of "democracy," the Democratic Party allowed Trump and his co-conspirators to remain free more than three years after the January 6 insurrection. There is no question that if Trump were to win the 2024 election, the Democrats would do everything in their power to "reach across the aisle" to accommodate their Republican colleagues, including trampling on abortion rights if it means securing trillion-dollar war budgets.



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