

Editorial: Stop fighting to block voters

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Florida leaders' battle to keep former felons from the polls is a national embarrassment, one that will only draw more notoriety to the state as the November election draws near.

It's past time to honor the intent of voters and provide a clear, achievable path back to full citizenship rights for people who have paid their debt to society.

Before 2018, Florida was one of only three states that permanently stripped voting rights from anyone convicted of a felony. The only path to regain the vote was the state's cumbersome, politically stacked clemency process — which ground to a near-halt under former Gov. Rick Scott.

Scott's purposeful foot-dragging was almost certainly on the minds of the 65% of voters who approved 2018's Amendment 4. Under that amendment, most people who had completed their sentences were eligible for a near-automatic restoration of voting rights.

But the Republican-dominated Legislature threw up a roadblock. On the last day of the 2019 session, lawmakers approved a bill requiring anyone seeking the restoration of their voting rights to prove they'd paid all fines, fees, restitution and other costs associated with their convictions.

For many, it was an unachievable burden. Start with the fact that Florida's criminal-justice system is designed to pile on fees from the start — beyond restitution for crime victims (which might be justifiably seen as part of an official sentence) there are court costs, charges for public defender services, monthly bills for probation — even charges associated with the time prisoners spend behind bars. Few people released from prison have the means to pay such fees, creating the equivalent of a modern-day poll tax.

Even for those who could pay, there's no central database of money that's owed, creating an "administrative nightmare" for elections supervisors and those seeking voting rights, U.S. District Judge Robert Hinkle ruled, striking down key portions of the law. A panel of judges at the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals agreed — but Gov. Ron DeSantis then appealed the decision to the full appellate court. Arguments are scheduled for Aug. 18.

A wide variety of groups, ranging from the libertarian Cato Institute to attorney generals of 19 states, have filed friend-of-the-court briefs asking that Hinkle's ruling be upheld.

Rights-restoration advocates are also challenging the participation of appeals-court judges Robert Luck and Barbara Lagoa, who participated in discussion of the voting-rights law while serving as DeSantis-appointed members of the Florida Supreme Court. Their neutrality is certainly in question; they should not participate in this case.

State leaders have shown wisdom in one respect: So far, they're not challenging those former felons who have registered to vote, and it's difficult to determine how those challenges could shape up in the week before the Nov. 3 election while still respecting due process.

DeSantis should think about the perception he's creating by fighting to strip voting rights from hundreds of thousands of people on the brink of a historic election.