

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Sign Voting Restoration Amendment petition to help fix Tallahassee and Washington

BY JEFF BORG

HOW DID POLITICIANS GET SO OUT of touch with Florida voters? The usual suspected reasons are public apathy, political gerrymandering, and big money. A more fundamental answer may be: Certain people are systematically excluded from voting by the Reconstruction-era tool of felon disenfranchisement.

This year, Floridians can help fix our state Constitution and bring as many



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as 1.3 million of our friends, neighbors, and coworkers back into the ranks of voters by downloading the Voting Restoration Amendment petition form posted at www.floridiansforafairdemocracy.com, signing, and mailing it in.

A felony is a crime punishable by more than a year in prison. Violent crimes are felonies, but most felonies are not violent crimes. Felonies include cheating on taxes and smoking a joint. People convicted of felonies pay their fines, do their time, and rejoin our communities. For practical reasons, we want them invested in society.

According to a 2012 report by The Sentencing Project, 10.4 percent of Florida's 14.8 million voting-age residents are disenfranchised due to a past felony conviction: that is 218,242 currently in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole, plus another 1.32 million who have paid their debts to society, for a total of 1.54 million excluded from voting. Florida is the worst state in this regard both by rate and by absolute numbers. Many states restore voting rights after sentences are complete, and some states never withhold them.

How might 1.54 million residents have affected the 2014 election? Amendment 2, which would authorize medical marijuana, fell just 139,092 votes short of passage. Rick Scott beat Charlie Crist for the governorship by just 64,145 votes.

Disenfranchisement is even more embarrassing when we realize how our state marginalizes African-American communities. More than 23 percent of Florida's 2.23 million black voting-age residents are disenfranchised: that is 87,682 currently in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole, plus 432,839 who have paid their debts to society, for a total of 520,521 blacks excluded — also the worst of any state.

In addition to poll taxes, literacy tests, and other schemes from the Jim Crow era, states like Florida increased the number of crimes for which blacks could be arrested, convicted, and disenfranchised.

In 2010, whites and blacks used marijuana at similar rates, but Florida blacks were 4.2 times more likely to be arrested for possession, according to a 2013 ACLU national study. In Miami-Dade County, where blacks make up 20 percent of residents, they were 5.4 times more likely to be arrested for possession. By generating

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WE ARE DEEPLY SADDENED by the February 3, 2015, death of the Greater Miami Chapter's past president and multi-decade board member Terry Coble. Terry, the wife of former longtime board member and Florida Legal Services lawyer and legislative lobbyist Arthur Rosenberg, died of complications from cancer.

Terry was chapter president in 2004 and 2005. She served as associate editor of *The Flame* for many years and regularly contributed articles. Terry was active on many legal issues including voters' rights and the rights of sex offenders and homeless persons. She was a core member of the *Pottinger* legal team and actively participated in the 2014 negotiations that led to the settlement of Miami's efforts to nullify the consent decree.

Terry served for many years as an attorney with Legal Services of Greater Miami, then as policy director at the Human Services Coalition of Miami-Dade County, and most recently as program and policy director for the Miami Coalition for the Homeless. Her no-nonsense style, passionate advocacy, and friendship will be greatly missed.



Coble

more felony convictions, the power structure can exclude more blacks from voting.

The proposed Voting Restoration Amendment, which the ACLU of Florida supports, would restore voting rights in Florida upon the completion of all terms of the sentence, including parole or probation. It excludes persons convicted of murder or sexual offense.

If we help collect at least 683,149 petitions, and 60 percent of voters approve the amendment in 2016, voting rights will be restored to an estimated 1.3 million of our fellow Floridians.

