



**Written Statement of the
Southern Poverty Law Center
Before U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on House Administration
Subcommittee on Elections
“Voting Rights and Election Administration in Florida”**

**Fort Lauderdale, Florida
*May 2019***

Introduction

Florida continues to showcase the ongoing impact of Jim Crow era voter suppression laws targeted at making sure former slaves, newly enfranchised through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, were never able to enjoy full citizenship. Over one hundred years later, Florida still has some of the harshest voting restrictions in the country and disenfranchises more voters than any other state.¹ Prior to the November 2018 mid-term elections, almost 10% of the state's voting age population was permanently disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, and African-American/Black citizens represented a disproportionate number of those disparately impacted.² Moreover, despite litigation to curb the state's aggressive and unlawful approach to voter purging³, Florida nevertheless removes voters from the rolls at an alarming rate.⁴ In 2019, following a string of successful ballot initiatives over the years, including Amendment 4 which single-handedly restored the voting rights of over 1.4 million voters, the state legislature introduced an unprecedented number of bills attacking basic civil liberties, some of which are highlighted below.

Passage of Amendment 4 and Senate Bill 7066

For over the past 15 years, numerous bills have been introduced to automatically re-enfranchise voters with felony convictions, but the legislature has done nothing to advance, let alone pass, these measures. In November 2018, Florida citizens decided they had had enough with wa a

except those convicted of murder or felony sexual offenses, upon completion of all terms of their sentence.”⁷

After hosting numerous community town halls, tabling at every kind of public event, running multiple television advertisements and other public service announcements, and engaging in deep canvassing, almost 65% of Floridians voted “YES” on Amendment 4.⁸ Over a million formerly convicted individuals can now participate in our democracy. Unfortunately, in an undisguised, blatant attempt to undermine the will of the people, the state legislature passed SB 7066, which materially changed the meaning and enforcement of Amendment 4 in two key ways: first, by expanding the definition of murder and, second, by redefining “completion of sentence” to include the payment of almost any and all legal financial obligations (LFOs), even those converted to a civil lien.⁹

The legislature knew exactly what it was doing when it required the full satisfaction of all LFOs prior to someone being eligible to vote. SB 7066 imposes exorbitant financial barriers to the ballot box which many have decried as a modern-day poll tax. The average citizen who completes prison, parole and probation faces steep challenges in securing gainful employment, safe and secure housing, and financial assistance to attend school. If enforced, the likelihood that most people who were eligible to vote under Amendment 4 can satisfy those additional financial hurdles is much, much smaller. Therefore, SB 7066 completely runs afoul of the plain language and meaning of Amendment 4, now enshrined in the state constitution¹⁰, as recognized by the state supreme court and understood by the voters.

In addition to being unconstitutional, SB 7066 creates a world of confusion for impacted individuals and the agencies and grassroots organizations that serve them. Many people have registered to vote since Amendment 4 went into effect in January 2019, and now those voters face the loss again of their voting rights. Despite voters’ best intentions in passing Amendment 4, the legislature has again found a way to keep Florida’s disenfranchised population ever so high. Not only is this a huge setback, but it only further undermines the people’s faith in our democracy.

Restrictions on Petition Gathering (SB 7096)

Amendment 4 passed because Florida’s ballot initiative process allows citizens to bypass legislators who refuse to respect the demands of their constituents when it comes to adopting progressive social policies. In disappointing, yet true fashion that I b _lpopa ca hla r nd

right to free speech and freedom of association in violation of the First Amendment.¹² Further, the Supreme Court has deemed the prohibition on payment to petition circulators as violating the First Amendment as well.