

## The Inclusive Office: Democracy's fragility on display in election

By: Duwaine T. Bascoe ◉ November 24, 2020 📌 0



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In 2018, and again in this election year, I was asked by the Florida Democratic Party to work on the gubernatorial campaign and the presidential campaign, respectively. In 2018, I worked in Florida for three weeks on the Andrew Gillum campaign as the Director of Voter Protection for Broward County, and this year I operated remotely, assisting Broward County with the Biden/Harris campaign. More than anything I have experienced, living and working immersed in these two campaigns has opened my eyes to the fragility of our democracy.

Initially, I was stationed at various polling locations, then moved to canvass headquarters, and finally to the campaign's "Boiler Room" (the hub of the campaign). At each stage I was able to witness and engage in every aspect of the political campaign. I watched the enthusiasm of first-time voters and the dedication of door knockers. In contrast, I also witnessed the precision needed to dispatch attorneys to challenge and cure ballots, as well as relaying quick responses to voting improprieties. Florida has been called the "wild-wild-west" of voter suppression, and if I have not seen it all, I have seen too much of it already: a blind voter being denied the right to cast his ballot, even though his daughter was by his side, ready and able to sign the affidavit by which Florida permits a disabled person the ability to have assistance in voting; the mail bomber being arrested one block from the Florida campaign office I was working out of; people routinely showing up with guns at the polling locations to intimidate voters; massive voter list purges; and underhanded attempts to keep former felons from voting.

During the 2018 election, Florida's Amendment 4 Ballot Initiative overwhelmingly passed, granting former felons the right to vote and overturning a 150-year-old law, a relic of the Civil War that was meant to keep black people off the voter rolls. In the immediate aftermath of this monumental victory for democracy, the newly minted governor signed a bill, which prohibited former felons from registering to vote if they still owed various court fines, fees, and restitution to the victims of their crimes.

Despite the portion of the September 2020 opinion by the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit in *Jones v. Florida*, which upheld the fine restrictions, there were 85,000 former felons who, prior to the commencement of the above referenced case, submitted their registration. Florida law required that each of them be screened for failure to pay their fines before they could be removed from the voter rolls. Since Florida failed to complete this screening process in time, all 85,000 former felons were entitled to vote. However, some supervisors of elections for certain counties in Florida started unlawfully rejecting these ballots. These incidents required constant vigilance and push back from legal volunteers in conjunction with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and other grassroots groups.

While doing this work for the past two years, I have realized something that goes beyond partisan politics. Violations of and widespread attempts to violate voting laws undermine and threaten the very fabric of our

democracy.

Our democracy and laws are, at their core, nothing more than sociological norms, meaning that we behave in accordance with what our society values as good, right, and important. Most members of a society will adhere to collectively defined values with the communal agreement that violations of these norms will be treated with acceptable consequences. When we regress to a level wherein violations of these social norms are no longer castigated, but rather are condoned, even celebrated when used in the pursuit of election victory at any cost, it gives license to the deconstruction of other pillars of our society.

In September of this year, I had the privilege of moderating a CLE on voting. In the materials provided by Professor James Gardner, Esq., entitled "Voter Suppression and Authoritarianism," he states that there are signs we are heading down the path toward authoritarianism wherein manipulation of the electoral process takes place to ensure a maintenance of power even in the face of "future erosion of public support." Specifically, he states that "the baseline assumptions in modern democracies are (1) that suffrage should be universal, and (2) that all who wish to participate in democratic self-rule should have a reasonable opportunity to do so." As such, the cost of willful, win-at-all-cost electoral manipulations, may very well be our democracy.

My experience in Florida leads me to believe that if left unchecked, we are closer to democracy's demise than most would think.

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