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Florida Grants Felons the Right to Vote

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Last week, Florida voted to restore voting rights to as many as 1.4 million people with felony records, a number which includes 500,000 African-Americans. According to *The New York Times*, Amendment 4 passed with more than the required 60 percent threshold (and 766, 200 signatures were

to get re-enfranchised felons registered again, so they can exercise their new right.

Bearing these points in mind, it is crucial to look at the reform's implications. Simon says the Florida ACLU will oppose attempts by the state to deny registration by felons due to failure to pay fees charged by

According to The New York Times, Amendment 4 passed with more than the required 60 percent threshold (and 766, 200 signatures were needed to place it on the ballot). Thus, an overwhelming share of voters supported it. The amendment restores voting rights to felons who have completed their prison sentences, parole, and probation, except for those convicted of murder or sexual assault. In fact, many people said it was the proposed amendment that prompted them to vote.

needed to place it on the ballot). Thus, an overwhelming share of voters supported it. The amendment restores voting rights to felons who have completed their prison sentences, parole, and probation, except for those convicted of murder or sexual assault. In fact, many people said it was the proposed amendment that prompted them to vote. Most Floridians who voted for the amendment were from Democratic counties, but a considerable amount of support came from Republican-leaning counties.

Despite the measure's popularity, much debate preceded its passage. Supporters believed the voting laws unfairly eliminated democratic rights for felons. Opponents claimed that felons, in order to regain this right, should still be required to demonstrate through the justice system that they have fully reformed. It is important to note that Florida was one of only four states that disenfranchised former felons.

Under the state constitution, Amendment 4 will take effect on January 8. Howard Simon, outgoing executive director of the state's American Civil Liberties Union and one of the proponents who helped write the ballot language, said "people should just go register and vote," and that felons would not be required to provide evidence to election officials that they have completed their sentences. Other advocates of the measure say their priority now is

local clerks of court. However, Amendment 4 implies that several state agencies, which could include the Department of Corrections, the Department of Law Enforcement, and county elections offices, will have to share information about former felons in order to inform election officials of which of them have completed their sentences and are able to vote. Judith Browne Dianis, executive director of the Advancement Project which worked for the measure, said her nonprofit and other groups will monitor election officials to see whether they are asking felons to provide paperwork showing they have completed their sentences, a requirement she believes could again disenfranchise them. So there is clearly a dispute about the manner in which the amendment will be implemented.

While the right to vote is absolutely a democratic and human right that should be guaranteed to our citizens, it is important to discuss exactly what any exceptions should be. Since felonies in Florida can range from simple drug possession to aggravated assault, the seriousness of each type undeniably varies. But regardless of the crime, it is important that felons demonstrate they have reformed at least to the extent of having completed their sentences, including parole and probation. For this reason, Florida state officials should require that former felons who wish to vote have done this.

The Blue Wave: Midterm Elections in Perspective

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In the buildup to the midterm elections, nothing garnered more attention than the much-ballyhooed "blue wave" being sold by many politicians. It was hard to tell whether they truly believed this prediction or it was a tactical move, a self-fulfilling prophecy, as if the more they talked it up, the more the masses would get on board and make it a reality. As human nature would lead us to expect after any competition that lacks a definite winner and loser, both sides rushed to claim victory while applauding the high voter turnout rate. Unfortunately, this phenomenon often has an effect opposite to the outcome they are trying to elicit -- overinterpreting the strength of one or the other party's performance after the election will discourage turnout the next time.

Much of the excitement about turnout in the wake of the midterm elections drew on the highly touted statistic that the voting rate of 18- to 29-year-olds increased by an unprecedented 2 percent in comparison with the last midterm. Hardly

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mentioned, however, was the fact that even with such an increase, the generation with the largest growth in turnout still had the lowest percentage. Because media outlets are selectively using statistics to make their political sides look better, they actually lull voters into a false sense of security. If those on the left hope to make a difference in the 2020 presidential election, they need to be less afraid to be honest.

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There is no better example of this danger of producing apathy than the 2016 election. Most major media outlets were convinced there was no way Donald Trump could win. Their coverage gave the impression that there was no point in people showing up at the polls because the outcome was preordained. I personally know many people who were going to vote, but decided not to since “the election was already decided.”

The only way to truly combat this is to stay informed of the facts. Given the inordinate amount of misinformation we are deluged with every day, this is easier said than done. One example is Joy Behar explaining to her millions of viewers that

“Republicans were able to pick up seats in the Senate by gerrymandering,” as if it were somehow possible to alter state boundaries. It is also worth understanding the meaning of election outcomes more clearly by seeing past the hype. Those who are saying the “blue wave” last week was a historic leap for the left should know that since World War II, the incumbent president’s party has lost an average of 37 House seats in its first midterm, plus seats in the Senate. In fact, Bill Clinton’s first midterm saw a total of 60 House and Senate seats switch to the other party, and Barack Obama lost a total of 69 seats. Taking into account the Senate seats picked up by Republicans (only the third time in more than a century that this

has happened for the president’s party in a first midterm), the net “blue wave” will be well under 40 seats. And none of this even addresses the fact that the Democrats lost more than 1,000 congressional and state legislative seats under Obama.

It would be lovely to think that we, as a country, could learn some lessons from the misleading coverage and commentary in 2016 and 2018. I am skeptical, however. Judging by the public response I have seen, in person and on social media, it looks like the only way out of this circular firing squad is for all of us to be better informed, and to start being more honest with ourselves, by thinking past the simplistic cliches we often hear about elections.

Europe’s Immigration Crisis: What We Can Learn From It

NIKKI MATSUOKA
STAFF WRITER

Coming into the school year, I was only somewhat aware of the immigration and refugee crisis spreading all over Europe. It was not until my Introduction to Public Policy class that I really got a grasp of the surrounding issues. The class focuses on immigration and refugee policy. A major group project in it is a policy brief on the immigration and refugee practices of a country of our choice. Many are part of

and Middle Eastern countries attempt to escape the everyday terror in their homelands by migrating to European countries. The EU’s open borders allow for the movement of these undocumented migrants into Europe. The very high rate of immigrant movement into Europe has meant that many immigrants must wait to receive asylum from the European nation they came to. However, some European leaders are working to stop

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the European Union (EU), which has an open borders policy. Open borders across Europe were enacted in 1985 as part of the Schengen Agreement, which did away with border checks. By now, 26 European countries have open borders. Although the idea was good in theory, EU countries could not have predicted its outcome in the years to come.

The citizens of various African

the flow into their countries. Most heads of government on the continent have made immigration a cornerstone of their political campaigns, vowing to halt immigrants at their borders.

Right-wing European leaders have been dedicated to closing off their countries’ borders. In 2017, Marine Le Pen of France’s National Front party garnered wide support with her

emphasis on protecting its borders and therefore, in her view, its citizens. (Le Pen’s nationalistic message spread all over France, but ended up losing to the liberal Emmanuel Macron’s promises of centrist change.) Italy this year witnessed the rise of the right-wing Giuseppe Conte and Matteo Salvini as Prime Minister and Interior Minister after their parties’ election victory. Italy’s close proximity to North Africa means that more African migrants go there, especially those trying to escape war-torn Libya. One of the first moves Salvini made as Interior Minister was the closing of Italian ports to ships carrying loads of Libyan refugees. Viktor Orban of Hungary is yet another right-wing leader who has embraced this authoritarian approach, closing Hungary’s borders. The influence of nationalist and far-right sentiment across Europe is a testament to the rise in the number of refugees attempting to escape their oppressive and violent homelands.

How can European countries bridge the gap between implementing efficient border controls and offering refugees the opportunity to escape war-torn countries? It is easy to identify the roots of the issues involved in the immigration and refugee crisis, but crafting solutions to them is ultimately more important. Far-right and nationalist leaders have policies they consider valid solutions, and are willing to implement them, but in the process they ignore the well-being of the refugees. New policies must be created that respect the humanitarian aspect of the situation. Refugees’ lives depend on it.

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