

Democracy reform should guide voting proposals | Guestview

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Guest columnist

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Florida's Legislature has joined a number of other states considering new voting rules. A recent survey of scholars suggests that this effort may be misplaced. The real challenge, they suggest, is to expand democracy.

"We want everyone to vote," explains Gov. Ron DeSantis, "But we don't want anyone to cheat." I agree. Election integrity is crucial to democratic integrity. Florida is no stranger to this challenge. From Jim Crow-era voter suppression to the drama of the 2000 presidential election, Floridian voters have personally experienced the growing pains of American democracy. Determined to improve, Florida's state and local elections professionals have built an exemplary system. "Fraud" of any kind is exceedingly rare. When other swing states were mired in slow counting, most of Florida's 2020 results appeared within hours thanks to efficient and reliable counting systems.

Ideally, Americans should be able to show up at a local polling place, be quickly identified and cast a ballot. They should see bipartisan observers holding the system accountable, and they should rest assured that ballot counts are secure and reliable. For me and many others, this has been the reality, not just the ideal. Voting day can be a happy experience, an affirmation of our community and ourselves.

For others, unfortunately, the experience is less Rockwell and more Orwell. From its earliest days, American voting was sometimes marred by practices ranging from bribing voters to direct threats and violence. Challenges as simple as finding transportation to or information about polling stations prevented some Americans from voting. Racism and sexism were used for decades to withhold this fundamental right. Wounds from those chains still shape the health of our polity.

DeSantis explains that he wants to "stay ahead of the curve" of possible problems. On their face, such changes seem sensible. They focus on absentee, or mail-in, voting. The new rules would limit vote-by-mail to direct requests, disallow "ballot harvesting" (when a third party submits an absentee ballot), increase the vote-by-mail

signature verification process and prohibit public-private cooperation on get-out-the-vote activities. These are similar to GOP voting policies appearing in other states.

Democrats argue that these rules are tantamount to voter suppression. There is no problem to fix, they argue, and once implemented, they raise the specter of those older abuses and decrease the number of Floridians casting votes. Rather than an expanded electorate and ensuring more representative and democratic outcomes, many Floridians will experience constricted access to voting.

This is a big debate, but Floridians are thinking too small about their democracy. Last month, researchers at Bright Line Watch, a group of academics focused on monitoring American democracy, released their latest survey of politics and policy experts. Evaluating the state of American democracy, they asked about support for some dramatic ideas.

The results were surprising for their almost universal appeal. Nearly all respondents, 95%, supported “flexibility on when and how to vote” and only a slightly smaller number supported same day voter registration as well as suffrage for ex-felons. Over 80% supported converting Election Day into a national holiday, pre-registering young voters, instituting a national popular vote and even public funding of campaigns. Notably, compulsory voting was far less popular. This suggests that the experts wish to maximize participation but not at the cost of individual freedom.

Remarkably, even more ambitious changes gained traction. Over 70% supported ranked choice voting and multimember districts for representatives. Ranked choice allows voters to choose a top candidate as well as preferences for a second, third or more. This can allow candidates with broader appeal to rise. Multimember districts would send more than one representative to Tallahassee or D.C. This type of district is often paired with “proportional representation,” which allows candidates from more than one party — perhaps even third parties — to gain seats relative to their number of votes.

Formulating the details of such change is difficult. We have to accept balls and strikes along with the occasional home run. Still, we can see that such systems can work well in fellow democracies, like Germany, a federal system with a large population and advanced economy.

Whatever the fate of Florida’s proposed voting rules, Floridians should begin to experiment with more ambitious electoral arrangements — practices and systems that expand participation and elections that end not just with a clear winner but also a broader representation of all our voices. Florida led electoral reform after the 2000 election. Now it can lead democracy reform.

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