

April 20, 2023

Mrs. Berit Reiss-Andersen
Chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee
The Norwegian Nobel Committee
NO-0244 Oslo, Norway

Distinguished Chair Reiss-Andersen and Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee:

We, the undersigned non-governmental, civil and voting rights organizations,¹ write to enthusiastically urge the Nobel Committee to award the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRRC) for its unwavering leadership on strengthening democracy. In November 2018, FRRRC achieved the extraordinary victory of garnering the support of nearly two-thirds of Florida voters from across the political spectrum to expand access to voting.

Today democracy and peace are under threat around the world, challenged by polarization, the proliferation of mis- and dis-information, and the rise of authoritarianism. FRRRC has been a beacon for inclusivity in the democratic process, for second chances for people on the edges of society, and for the importance of the right to vote. The coalition remains devoted to fighting for self-determination – a fundamental human right central to a free, peaceful, and fair society.

In 2018, FRRRC was responsible for the largest single expansion of voting rights in the United States since the Constitution was amended in 1971. It won its victory over a notorious and racially discriminatory system that was a remnant of the Jim Crow era of a century ago. The system barred anyone with a past felony conviction from voting for their entire lifetime. It disenfranchised as many as 1.7 million otherwise eligible voters.²

FRRRC is led by Floridians with past convictions who have themselves been locked out of our democratic institutions. The coalition forged a multiracial and bipartisan movement that led to the successful passage of Amendment 4 – the historic amendment to the state constitution that brought an end to Florida’s system of lifetime disenfranchisement. The fight continues: the state legislature moved to weaken the measure by narrowing its reach only to those citizens with past convictions who did not owe fines and fees.³ Despite that significant setback, as many as 700,000 Floridians are now eligible to register and vote.

¹ We are non-governmental organizations that advocated for the passage of Amendment 4, that litigated in federal court to try to prevent the state legislature from requiring those whose rights were restored by the amendment to pay off all their fines and fees before voting, and that continue to work to defend and expand the right to vote of Floridians with past convictions.

² Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon, *6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016*, The Sentencing Project, October 2016, 15, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/6-Million-Lost-Voters.pdf> (hereinafter “*6 Million Lost Voters*”).

³ S.B. 7066, Reg. Sess. (Fla. 2019), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2019/7066>.

Florida’s permanent disenfranchisement of people with past convictions who had completed their prison sentences made it an outlier – not only in the United States,⁴ but also among other democratic countries.⁵ By 2016, nearly one out of every four people disenfranchised in the United States lived in Florida.⁶ The Jim Crow-era policy also disproportionately burdened Black Floridians due to the entrenched bias of the criminal justice system. One out of every five Black adults in the state could not vote.⁷ This harmful impact was no coincidence. After the U.S. Civil War ended slavery, southern states passed criminal laws known as “Black Codes” and coupled them with voting bans for those who violated those laws.⁸ These laws undermined the U.S. Constitution’s guarantee of the vote for Black men. That impact persists today. Black adults in the United States, who bear the brunt of mass incarceration, are 3.5 times more likely to be disenfranchised than non-Black adults.⁹

For years, our organizations and other voting rights groups struggled without success to undo this system, in court, in the legislature, and with executive action. FRRC then stepped into the lead, putting formerly incarcerated people front and center of this fight. It had the courage and confidence to believe that Floridians would back a chance for democratic participation for their fellow citizens. FRRC collected over 800,000 signatures to place Amendment 4 on the ballot.¹⁰ The coalition also built a diverse groundswell of support by drawing on universal values of human rights, second chances, forgiveness, and redemption, bringing together conservatives, libertarians, civil rights champions, businesses, labor unions, faith leaders, activists, and artists. In the end, Amendment 4 received the support of more than 5 million Florida voters who were willing to support the rights of the disenfranchised. The amendment also received one million more votes than any candidate on the same ballot.

This victory ignited change across the United States: 10 other states and Washington, D.C. have since restored the right to vote for people previously ineligible because of a felony conviction,¹¹ amounting to as many as half a million Americans who newly have access to the ballot box in part because of FRRC. That number will soon grow due to legislation recently passed in Minnesota¹² and New Mexico.¹³ We work on these efforts in many states and it’s clear FRRC provided an inspiration and a path for all this work.

⁴ Prior to Amendment 4’s passage, Florida was one of three states that permanently disenfranchised its citizens convicted of a felony. Erika Wood, *Florida: An Outlier in Denying Voting Rights*, Brennan Center for Justice, December 16, 2016, 3, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/florida-outlier-denying-voting-rights>.

⁵ We know of no other democracy in the world apart from the United States where individuals convicted of a felony can be permanently barred from voting even after their release from incarceration. Allan J. Lichtman, *The Embattled Vote in America: From the Founding to the Present* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 233–34.

⁶ Uggen, Larsen, and Shannon, *6 Million Lost Voters*, 3.

⁷ Uggen, Larsen, and Shannon, *6 Million Lost Voters*, 3.

⁸ Erin Kelly, *Racism & Felony Disenfranchisement: An Intertwined History*, Brennan Center for Justice, May 9, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/racism-felony-disenfranchisement-intertwined-history>.

⁹ Christopher Uggen et al., *Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights*, The Sentencing Project, October 25, 2022, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/locked-out-2022-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights/>.

¹⁰ Florida Division of Elections, “Voting Restoration Amendment,” accessed April 20, 2023, <https://dos.elections.myflorida.com/initiatives/initdetail.asp?account=64388&seqnum=1>.

¹¹ Sean Morales-Doyle, “Voter Restoration as a Blueprint for Fighting Disenfranchisement,” Brennan Center for Justice, April 18, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/voter-restoration-blueprint-fighting-disenfranchisement>.

¹² H.F. 28, 93rd Leg., Reg. Sess. (Minn. 2023), <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?f=HF28&b=house&y=2023&ssn=0>.

¹³ H.B. 4, 56th Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.M. 2023), <https://nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation?Chamber=H&LegType=B&LegNo=4&year=23>.

With the success of Amendment 4, FRRC now helps the hundreds of thousands of Floridians who are now eligible to vote exercise that right. At the same time, the coalition is helping those who are still barred from voting because they cannot afford to pay off their fines and fees. FRRC is also supporting the defense of dozens of Floridians with past felony convictions who were arrested and charged for mistakenly thinking they were eligible to vote.¹⁴

This work matters more than ever, amid waning support for democracy, increased attacks on independent electoral systems and institutions, and moves by autocrats to consolidate power. It stands as a rebuke, in the United States, to the “election denier” movement that falsely claims the 2020 election was stolen, leading to the violent January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. And in Mexico, to the efforts to undermine the National Electoral Institute, an autonomous electoral body responsible for conducting the country’s elections and for overseeing its political financing rules. And in Brazil, to the unfounded accusations of a rigged presidential election that led to an attack on the nation’s Congress in Brasilia last year.

FRRC’s contribution to this ongoing fight to defend democracy and human rights extends beyond the monumental change it achieved in Florida and galvanized elsewhere. Through their efforts to undo a long-standing vestige of Florida’s racist history, FRRC created a model for bringing together people from all walks of life and political stripes to expand access to the democratic process by leaning into our shared sense of humanity and demonstrating the power of the will of the people.

For these reasons, we urge the Nobel Committee to award the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize to FRRC. The selection of FRRC for this honor would strengthen its fight to overcome oppression and make it more likely that a remnant of Jim Crow in Florida is finally relegated away by sending a meaningful signal that the world is behind this fight. It would also elevate the power of multiracial and bipartisan coalitions to come together to collectively defeat exclusion, cynicism, and 150 years of shameful history both in the United States and abroad.

Sincerely,

Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School
American Civil Liberties Union
NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc.

¹⁴ Brennan Center for Justice, *10 Reasons Courts Should Toss Florida’s Flimsy ‘Voter Fraud’ Prosecutions*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/10-reasons-courts-should-toss-floridas-flimsy-voter-fraud-prosecutions>; Gabriella Sanchez, “In Florida, The Right to Vote Can Cost You,” Brennan Center for Justice, September 7, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/florida-right-vote-can-cost-you>.