

Lebron James Recent Efforts to End Voter Suppression

Ahead of a likely matchup with his former team, the Miami Heat, in the 2020 NBA finals, Lebron James is looking to challenge the state of Florida off the court as well. This past June, James (along with several other high-profile black athletes and entertainers) started the campaign, [More Than A Vote](#), to tackle systemic suppression of black voters. On the campaign's [website](#), James notes that his action was prompted partially in response to recently enacted Florida legislation, which he states is one of the “countless examples” of black voter suppression in the United States.

In 2018, Florida followed the example of various other states to end permanent disenfranchisement for ex-felons. Via referendum, 65% of voters approved Amendment 4, allowing ex-felons who had completed “[all terms of their sentence](#),” to vote. However, the referendum did not include a specific definition of the phrase “all terms of their sentence.”

This vagueness opened the door for the Florida government to undercut their constituents. In May 2019, the legislature clarified the phrase all terms of their sentence to include “[legal financial obligations](#),” fines and fees that [courts impose on top](#) of a criminal sentence. Subsequently, Governor Rob DeSantis augmented the legislature by requesting an advisory opinion from the Florida Supreme Court, who [affirmed](#) that legal financial obligations were indeed included in the definition of “all terms of their sentence.” The clarification essentially prevents felons—despite completing all other forms of punishment related to their felony—from voting unless they can pay additional burdensome costs connected to their sentence. Black people likely will be [disproportionately affected](#) by the clarification.

Several ex-felons, who would otherwise be able to vote if it were not for their outstanding legal financial obligations, filed suit against the Florida politicians. Their [winning argument](#) in a Florida district court was that the legislature's clarification of Amendment 4 violated the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause. However, the Eleventh Circuit [overturned](#) this decision, upholding the law's constitutionality. The Supreme Court unlikely to hear this or a similar case before the 2020 election.

Notwithstanding the court of appeal's decision, all hope is not lost for the 85,000 would-be Florida voters. In late August, before the court of appeals decision was handed down, the More Than a Vote campaign [donated over \\$100,000](#) to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition to help cover the otherwise disenfranchised voters' legal financial obligations.

While this is a temporary, non-legal solution, James' actions are certainly important. James is both allowing citizens who have atoned their wrongs to have their political voices heard—he is also shedding light on a problem that needs to end. Hopefully, James' efforts will not go to waste, and these new votes will promote change to permanently end any form of voter suppression.

-- *David Silversmith*

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The Eleventh Circuit has recently upheld a Florida law that makes it legal to prevent approximately 85,000 (mostly black) ex-felons from voting if they cannot pay legal fees accrued on top of their sentence. With a legal solution off the table for now, LeBron James has taken it upon himself to ensure those who have done their time will have their political voices heard.