



## Florida Senate Passes Voting Bill to Create Election Crimes Agency

### Description

USA: The Florida Senate passed a sweeping new bill overhauling the state's electoral process, adding new restrictions to the state election code and establishing a law enforcement office dedicated solely to investigating election crimes.

The bill, which passed 24-14, now goes to the state's House of Representatives, where it could pass as soon as next week and land on the desk of Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, who is expected to sign it. One Republican, State Senator Jeff Brandes, voted against it. A Democratic senator, Lorraine Ausley, initially voted yes, but [immediately posted on Twitter](#) that she "pushed the wrong button" and has since changed her vote.

Though Republicans in the state had passed another sweeping [voting law in May of last year](#), Mr. DeSantis made election reform one of the top priorities for this legislative session as well. Both efforts come after the 2020 election in Florida was without any major issues, and Republicans in the state touted it [as a "gold standard"](#) for election administration.

The legislation is poised to become the first major election-related bill to pass this year in a critical battleground state, and it would indicate no sign of cresting for the wave of new election laws, adding more restrictions to voting, that began last year — with 34 laws passed in 19 states.

The core of the bill is the establishment of a permanent election crimes office within the Department of State, which would make Florida one of the first states to have an agency solely dedicated to election crimes and voter fraud, despite such offenses being exceedingly rare in the United States. An investigation last year by The Associated Press found [fewer than 475 potential claims of fraud](#) out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

The new office would assist the secretary of state's office in investigating complaints and allegations, initiating their own independent inquiries and overseeing a voter fraud hotline. It would include an unspecified number of investigators, and Mr. DeSantis would also appoint at least one special officer in each of the regional offices of the State Department of Law Enforcement to investigate election crimes.

The bill would also raise the penalties on those collecting and submitting more than two absentee ballots from a misdemeanor to a felony.

Voting rights groups are worried that the continuing criminalization of the voting process could both frighten voters away from participating and leave election officials fearing prosecution over honest mistakes.

"Involving law enforcement with this sort of vague mandate obviously creates issues and can have certainly a detrimental effect in terms of the ability of voters to cast ballots if they're worried about law enforcement involvement," said Daniel Griffith, the policy director at Secure Democracy USA, a nonpartisan organization focused on elections and voter access. "And it has a detrimental effect on election officials if they're worried that there's going to be law enforcement over their shoulder."

Previously, investigations into election fraud were handled by Florida's secretary of state, the Department of Law Enforcement and the attorney general. Democrats argued that the bill effectively creates a new agency to do work that was done by existing agencies. The agency's creation, Democrats say, is just a political ploy to signal that Florida and Mr. DeSantis are staying tough on an issue core to both the Republican base and to former President Donald J. Trump.

"Why are we doing this?" said State Senator Lori Berman during debate on Friday. "The only thing I can think is that we're motivated by the 'Big Lie' that the elections nationwide didn't take place in a proper manner. But we know that is not true."

State Senator Travis Hutson, the sponsor of the bill and a Republican, defended it during debate on Friday, stating that having a dedicated force would both uncover more fraud and make the state able to handle more allegations.

"We did have great elections, the governor mentioned that," said Mr. Hutson. "But I would submit to you that we can always do better."

He added: "I will say there is no voter intimidation or no suppressing votes in this bill."

The new election office drew criticisms from some Republican members as well, who argued that it was unnecessary.

"For 15 people to go after what is potentially a handful of complaints that will ultimately be substantiated is just absolutely almost comical," said Mr. Brandes during debate on Friday, referring to suggestions from the executive branch that they assign 15 investigators to the office. "So I am not going to support this bill today."

Uniformed law enforcement officials have been used in the past to deter and suppress voters. In 1982, the Republican National Committee dispatched a group of armed, off-duty police officers known as the National Ballot Security Task Force to linger around New Jersey polling locations during a closely

contested governor's election. The Democratic National Committee sued, forcing the R.N.C. into a consent decree to ban such tactics.

Those memories appeared to be still on the minds of lawmakers in the Florida legislature. During debate on Thursday, State Senator Victor Manuel Torres Jr. asked Mr. Hutson, the sponsor of the bill: "Will these individuals be in uniform or civilian attire?"

Mr. Hutson responded that the current enforcement arm of the secretary of state dresses in civilian attire, and that members of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement are likely to be uniformed.

In addition to the new Office of Election Crimes and Security, the bill adds other new restrictions to voting, including banning ranked-choice voting; raising the cap on fines of third-party registration groups from \$1,000 to \$50,000; extending a ban on private funding for election administration to include the "cost of any litigation"; and replacing references to "drop boxes" with "secure ballot intake stations."

by Nick Corasaniti

### **Category**

1. Main
2. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

### **Date Created**

03/07/2022