Felon rights restoration an important issue this election

Excerpts from Tallahassee Democrat op-ed by Mark Schlakman, Esq., senior program director at FSU Center for the Advancement of Human Rights

Aug. 22, 2016

Research indicates 1.5 million Floridians who’ve completed felony sentences can’t vote, serve on a jury or hold public office in Florida – representing 25 percent of all felony disenfranchisement in the U.S. (Note: Restoration of firearm authority is handled separately.)

Minorities are disproportionately impacted given demographics of Florida’s prison population.

These startling numbers aren’t new, but circumstances were exacerbated when more restrictive criteria proposed by Attorney General Pam Bondi were adopted in March 2011, with no guarantee that such rights would be restored at any point.…. Under Florida’s constitution, civil rights are lost upon adjudication for a felony offense; restoration is a form of discretionary executive clemency, subject to certain rules – which the governor and Cabinet can change at any time. Generally, there’s no legislative oversight or judicial review. As a practical matter, the governor must favorably recommend all clemency applications and rule changes. At least two of the three Cabinet members must approve them as well.

For perspective, the Clemency Board granted 154,000 civil rights restorations during the four-year term of Gov. Charlie Crist. As of June 23, only 2,200 had been granted since Gov. Rick Scott took the oath of office in January 2011. That’s barely more than 1 percent of Crist’s total despite nearly 50 percent more time in office.…. Barring changing the clemency rules or amending Florida’s Constitution, Florida’s disproportionately high number of disenfranchised former felons will continue to spike through the end of Scott’s administration. That is, unless legislation introduced on Capitol Hill passes that would restore voting rights in federal elections upon completion of sentence.

Congressional candidates therefore should also should be queried during this election cycle.