



## **Florida College System Student Government Association**

Statement for the Record  
Submitted to the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the  
Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C.

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### **Introduction**

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Thank you Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. The Florida College System Student Government Association (FCSSGA) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide the Subcommittee with comments for the record in connection with the Subcommittee's hearing entitled, "New State Voting Laws II: Protecting The Right To Vote in the Sunshine State."

A top priority of FCSSGA is to ensure that the students of the Florida College System are actively engaged in their civic duties. One of the hallmarks of this engagement is voting. HB 1355, which became law on May 19, 2011, severely limits the access to voting for students and community members across the Sunshine State. In response to this legislation, FCSSGA has adopted a legislative issue calling for HB 1355 to be repealed and supporting legislation that would expand and protect the right to vote. As a part of our lobbying efforts, we support the new SB 516, which would allow the use of college campuses as early voting locations, and the adoption of same-day voter registration in Florida.

Further, FCSSGA believes that the right to vote is fundamental to our style of government. Laws that limit access to voting do nothing but curb enthusiasm for the democratic process. As a result of this law several classes of people will not be afforded the opportunity to fulfill

their civic duty and exercise their civil right. Consequently, FCSSGA strongly urges the committee when evaluating claims that this law makes it harder for tens of thousands of elderly, disabled, minority, young, rural, and low income Floridians to register and exercise their right to vote to err on the side of the American Values.

### **The Florida College System Student Government Association**

FCSSGA, formally known as the Florida Junior/Community Colleges Student Government Association (FJCCSGA), was founded in the spring of 1958 in St. Petersburg, Florida. The organization began under the premise of facilitating better communication between its member colleges while emphasizing communication and leadership development. The vision for the organization was, "to unify the member colleges in order to best attend to the appropriate concerns of the students of the Florida Community College system and serve as a vehicle to communicate these concerns to the Florida Legislative Body." In its initial stages, FCSSGA's college membership consisted of Pensacola State College, Gulf Coast State College, Chipola State College, Palm Beach State College, and St. Petersburg College.

FCSSGA has now grown to encompass twenty-eight state colleges that represent nearly 1.3-million college students' statewide. Through the expansion of its membership FCSSGA has gained the opportunity to sit and vote on the Florida College System Activities Association and report to The Council of Presidents. Of our membership, FCSSGA boasts a membership that has nurtured state and national legislators, college and university presidents, corporate CEO's respected physicians, and leaders in virtually every field. FCSSGA holds in high esteem, its staunch history of aggressively representing the student perspective and will continue to advocate on behalf of the concerns that our students face while continuing to strive for better communications and unity among its member colleges.

Out of the expansion of the organization also came the Legislative and fall conferences in which a preliminary issues packet is disseminated to and voted on by the member colleges. The preliminary issues packet entails the issues and concerns that the membership has submitted to our FCSSGA State Executive Board. Once the executive board vets the issues, the delegates from each of the state colleges in Florida vote on them. During FCSSGA's Fall Conference 410, students were present with 221 students designated as voting delegates

## **Early Voting**

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Campus life for many of the students in the Florida College System can be characterized by “CCC” or a Car to Class to Car experience. The demographic of our student base is predominately working class people who are attending college to further their business endeavors. Additionally, the students who frequent the halls of our twenty-eight state colleges have lives that require the balancing of schoolwork, often times a full-time job, and family life.

HB 1355 includes a provision that cuts early voter days from 14 to 8, discontinues Sunday voting access, and cuts the number of hours that an Early Voting location must be open by half. These new provisions embody more than just restriction to voter access, it represents a legalized and concerted effort to further discount numerous classes of people from the democratic process. These new provisions will hit the students of the Florida College System hard because the lives of the students within that system are hectic and very busy. The result will be fewer students at the polls.

One example of the type of student who will be impacted by the law is Jane. Jane is a 28-year-old full time student in the Bachelors of Paralegal Studies Program at Saint Petersburg College. In addition to being a full time student, she holds a full time job. A typical day for her is to work from 9:00am to 5:00pm and then class from 7:00pm to 9:40pm. The time between work and school is spent commuting and preparing for class. Like many Floridians with a schedule similar to Jane’s, voting during regular hours on Election is almost certainly out of the question.

Jane is working toward this degree to make herself a more valuable asset in the working community. Her class schedule, work responsibilities, and commute will leave her little time during the shortened voting period to perform her civic duty. With a weekly schedule that overextends her, the opportunity for Jane and many of the students like her to exercise their civil rights falls on the weekend, and often on Sunday.

## **Provisional Ballots**

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The Florida College System has a unique provision in place that allows students who attend a state or community college to seamlessly transfer to a University in the State of Florida with a full transfer of all credits taken. This provision is known as 2+2 articulation. This agreement between state colleges and universities is an incentive for

students to attend state college before attending university. The Florida College System's annual report cited that 51.3% of state college student's transferred and comprised the upper division student body of the State University System.<sup>1</sup>One of the side effects of this agreement is that students often change their county of residence after completing their degree at a state college to attend a university in the state.

A provision in HB 1355 amends F.S. §101.045 to provide that a voter may no longer change their address at a polling place by filling out an affirmation or voter registration form and vote on a regular ballot. Rather, the voter must vote on what is known as a provisional ballot. These provisional ballots are not guaranteed to be counted in the election. In 2008, 51% of provisional ballots were not counted. It is no secret that students are among the most underrepresented classes of people at the polls. This provision presents an obstacle to voter access among this class. Students who were participating in the democratic process are less likely to participate knowing that their vote has a 51% chance of not counting. Additionally, the election results in which 51% of provisional ballots are not counted cannot be an accurate reflection of the voice of the people.

### **Third-Party Voter Registration**

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One of the numerous provisions HB 1355 requires that a third-party voter registration organization must name a registered agent in the state and submit required information to the Division of Elections<sup>2</sup>. In the event that this provision is not met, the third-party will have heavy fines levied against them. As a result of this provision, many college Student Government Association groups have stopped voter registration drives, an activity that has been a trademark of the organization. Additionally, third-party organizations that would come to college campuses to register students to vote have stopped coming to campuses. Organizations such as Rock the Vote, The League of Women Voters, the Boy Scouts, the National Council of La Raza, and many smaller organizations have either limited or stopped their voter registration drives. It is important to note, HB 1355 became law in 2011 and we have not had an election year since its passage. As a result, we have not seen the full implications of this law in any aspect but especially in considering the implications of third-party voter registration groups.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Florida College System, Zoom, *FCS Graduates Transfer and Perform Successfully in the SUS*, 2011-06., Available at <http://www.fldoe.org/cc/OSAS/Evaluations/pdf/Zoom2011-06.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See F.S. §97.0575

For many students civic engagement starts with their time in college and specifically their interactions with voter registration and advocacy groups on campus. Because of HB 1355, we have already seen a decline in the presence of voter registration groups on campus. Many of these groups are simply unable to meet these new stringent for administrative requirements and they do not have the money to risk fines. This is especially true for student organizations. The ramifications of this law will be far reaching. Students who would normally discover the political process through their time in college will not be engaged the way they have been in years past. We will see a decline in the number of students who are registered to vote, who will as a result, not fulfill their civic duty.

### **State and Local Primaries**

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Another provision of HB 1355 calls for the date of state and local primaries to be moved from 10 weeks prior to the general election to 12 weeks prior to the general election.<sup>3</sup> On its face this seems like a harmless change. However, this change would make the primary the 14<sup>th</sup> of August. This date is a week before classes begin in higher education. As many students do not return to the college campus until classes begin this provision will prevent them from voting because they will not be in the county in which they are registered to vote. This is especially true for the students in Florida's University System. While students in the Florida College System are commuters and will not be directly impacted by this during their tenure at a state college they will be affected by this change when they transfer to the Florida University System. This provision will effectively prevent an entire class of people from voting in the primary election.

### **Advocacy**

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A large part of what FCSSGA focuses on is student advocacy. We strive to engage our student body in local, state, and national politics. We understand that spotting a problem is easy, doing something to affect change is not. Part of how we accomplish this task is to provide opportunities and support for the student body to advocate on the resolutions we adopt. The two main avenues we utilize to provide these opportunities are by providing support for campus-based initiatives, and by organizing rallies and lobbying our state representatives and senators to support repeal of portions of HB 1355. On Tuesday, February 2, we are holding a rally and press conference

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<sup>3</sup> See F.S. § 100.061

in Tallahassee featuring students from across the state that want to speak out against HB 1355.

Campus based initiatives are the backbone of how we advocate on behalf of our students. Student Government Association's from college campus to college campus vary in how they get the word out. The number one way is through calling and writing to our legislators on the issues. An example of campus-based initiatives is the work that Palm Beach State College is doing. They have utilized print media sources to advocate on the issue. Additionally, they have contacted their legislators to help advocate for SB 516.

The rally in Tallahassee is an opportunity for this organization's strength in numbers to shine. In recent years, we have organized hundreds of college students from around the state to show our legislators that we are informed about the issues relevant to us, passionate about change, and not to be ignored. In addition to a rallying with other students and hosting press conferences to inform the general public, we meet with legislators in the capitol and discuss not only the problems, but engage in a dialogue to find solutions.

We understand that problem spotting is easy, so we looked to find a solution to the inherent problems with HB 1355. That solution came in the form of SB 516. HB 1355 is a large piece of legislation that did not just create problems by restricting access to voting but it also had many administrative components. As a result, SB 516 focuses on combating many of the provisions that are restrictive to voting access. SB 516 mitigates the damage in the area of early voting. Under this new piece of legislation, there would be more available places for early voting. Additionally, the number of early voting days and hours would be extended by this legislation. This is a small but vital step in counteracting the harm of HB 1355.

## **Conclusion**

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The students of FCSSGA appreciate the Committee's work in protecting every American's right to vote. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer your questions.