

Voting Rights Project: Florida Preliminary Findings

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For decades now, Florida has gained national attention during elections for its consistently competitive races, diverse population, and heated debates on election security and fairness. In 2000, former President Bush’s victory was confirmed after a lengthy recount process and a decision by the United States Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore*. In 2018, the governor and United States Senator’s races were confirmed in favor of Republican candidates Ron DeSantis and Rick Scott by margins of 0.4 percent and 0.2 percent respectively — only after recounts for both races. In 2020, the Census confirmed that Florida is the 3rd largest state in the nation, with 30 electoral votes in the presidential election. Nationally, questions of how to create free and fair elections continue to arise. On one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic led many states to develop apparently less stringent voting laws, lessening restrictions on vote-by-mail requirements, adding ballot drop boxes, and more. On the other hand, some legislatures have levied claims against these types of laws for allegedly making voter fraud more prominent, especially in the wake of former President Trump’s claims that the 2020 election was “rigged.”

Florida is no exception to these trends. In 2018, Florida passed Amendment 4, which restored voting rights to upwards of 1.4 million people with prior felony convictions. Then, in April 2021, Florida passed Senate Bill 90, a bill the Governor’s office described as a “new election integrity bill, strengthening voter identification, prohibiting the mass mailing of ballots, banning ballot harvesting and prohibiting private money from administering elections.” (DeSantis) In April 2022, the state passed Senate Bill 524, another bill aimed at improving “election security, transparency, and administration.” (Florida Senate).

Voting rights groups, including the League of Women Voters in Florida, theorize that Senate Bills 90 and 524 will disproportionately impact voters of color, elderly voters, disabled voters, and students, making it harder for people to register to vote, vote by mail, and more

(Fogarty). The Cost of Voting Index (COVI) aims to measure “the relative difficulty of voting for each state” in the United States, with a higher score on the COVI indicating that voting is more difficult in a given state (*COVI*). Because the supporters of these bills claim to want to increase election security in the wake of concerns of voter fraud, it is unsurprising that the bills might increase the cost of voting in Florida. How the laws change voters’ ability to exercise their right to vote and which voters are impacted most, however, is another question.

The Florida Division of Elections, which lists state-wide election turnout data for the state of Florida, reports that voter turnout among registered voters in the general election dropped from 63 percent in 2018 to 54 percent in 2022 (Florida Department of State). According to the Palm Beach Daily News, voter rights groups view stricter voting laws as responsible for the drop in voter turnout. These strict laws include Senate Bill 524, which created Florida’s Office of Election Crimes and Security. According to voting rights advocates, many people expected that the law would disproportionately impact Black voters (Soule), largely because Black people are disproportionately incarcerated in the state of Florida. In 2023, The University of Florida’s Race and Crime Center for Justice reported that in 2020, Black people made up 48 percent of Florida’s incarcerated population despite making up only 14 percent of the state’s overall population (Jenkins et al.). Especially following the passage of Amendment 4, which generated confusion among formerly-incarcerated voters as to whether or not they were in fact eligible to vote, Black voters feared they would be targeted by the Election Crimes and Security Unit (Soule). Voters found their suspicions confirmed when voting fraud arrests began: Of the 20 people charged in the voting fraud arrests spurred by Senate Bill 524, 15 were Black (Soule). Other studies have shown that Florida’s election policies tend to discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities as well. An ACLU study of Florida’s 2018 vote-by-mail rejection rates found

that “younger voters, first-time voters, and voters from racial and ethnic minorities are much more likely to cast VBM ballots that are rejected by county Canvassing Boards” (ACLU of Florida).

Florida’s local media reflects multiple views surrounding changes in election turnout. NBC Miami, for example, confirmed that turnout dropped in 2022, especially among Democrats. In Miami-Dade County, for example, despite having more Democrats than Republicans, 61 percent of registered Republicans voted in 2022, while only 46 percent of registered Democrats did the same (Prazan). NBC also reported pointed out that national Democratic groups spent significantly more money in Florida in 2018 than they did in 2022 — a decline from about \$60 million to only \$1.4 million — suggesting that more than voting laws played a role in the decrease in voter turnout in Florida’s elections (Prazan) Regardless, that voter turnout decreased between 2018 and 2022, especially among Democrats, who are more likely to be young and/or voters of color, is agreed upon in the literature.

To begin this project, I collected turnout data at the county level for the State of Florida. I recorded turnout from 2018, 2020, and 2022, primarily comparing 2018 and 2022 as both years are midterm - rather than presidential election years. I found that in [57 counties out of the 62](#) that freely reported county-level turnout data for both 2018 and 2022, turnout decreased between 2018 and 2022. These findings are represented in the graphics below.

Figure 1: Florida State-wide Voter Turnout by Total Votes Counted (2018, 2022)

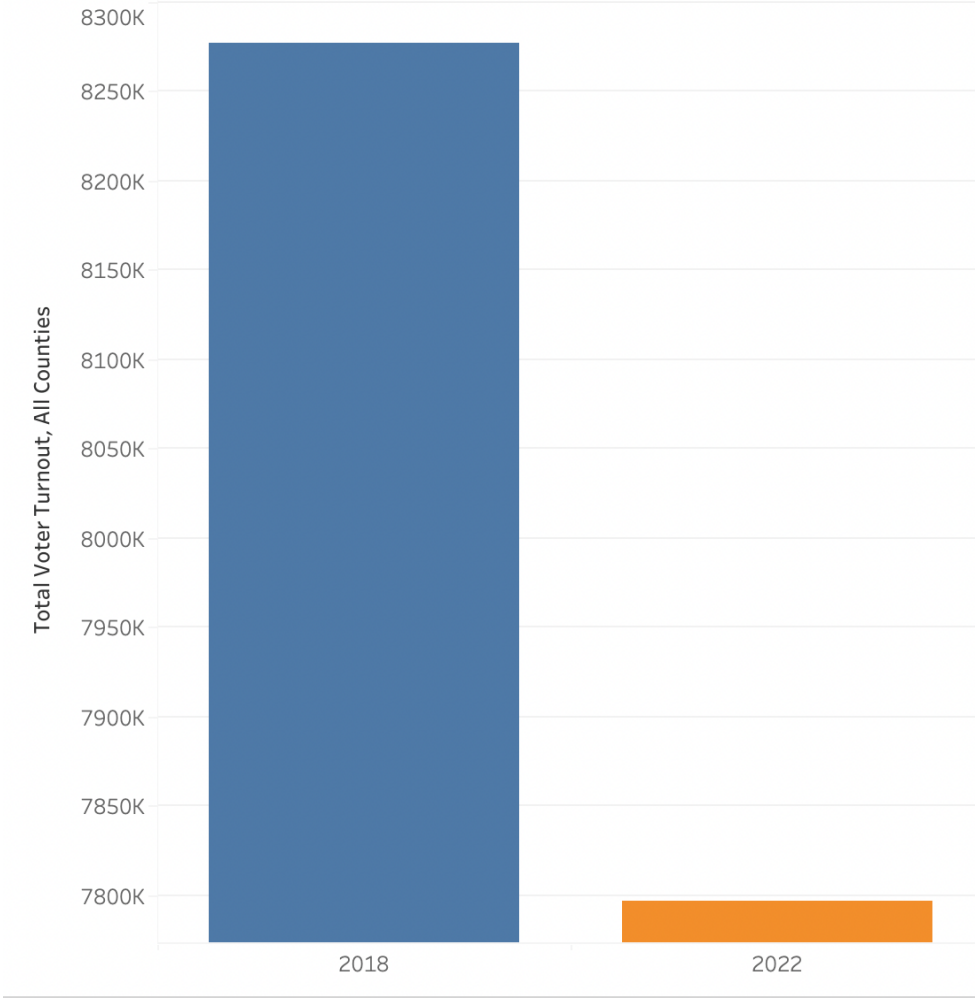


Figure 2: Florida Voter Turnout Rate by County (2018)

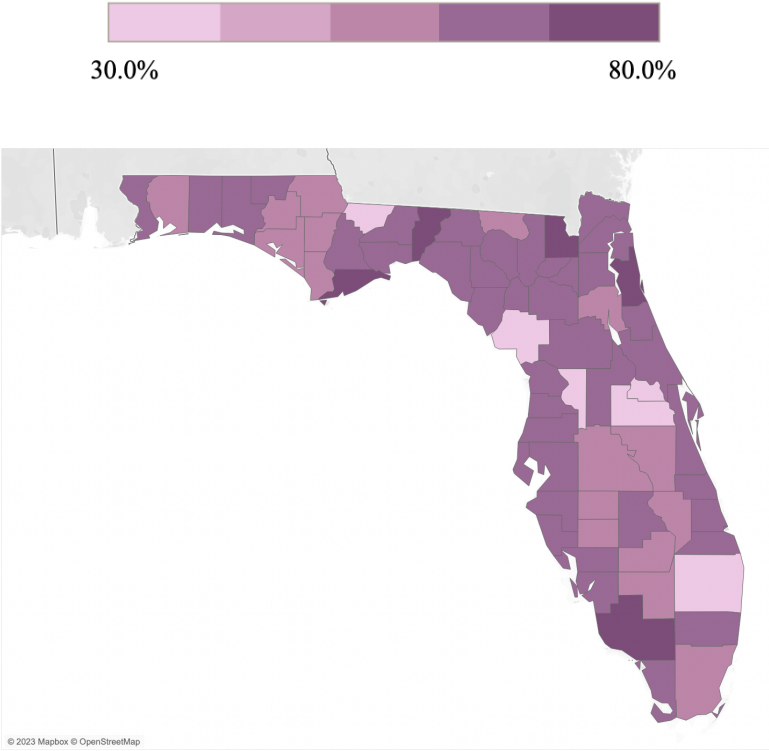
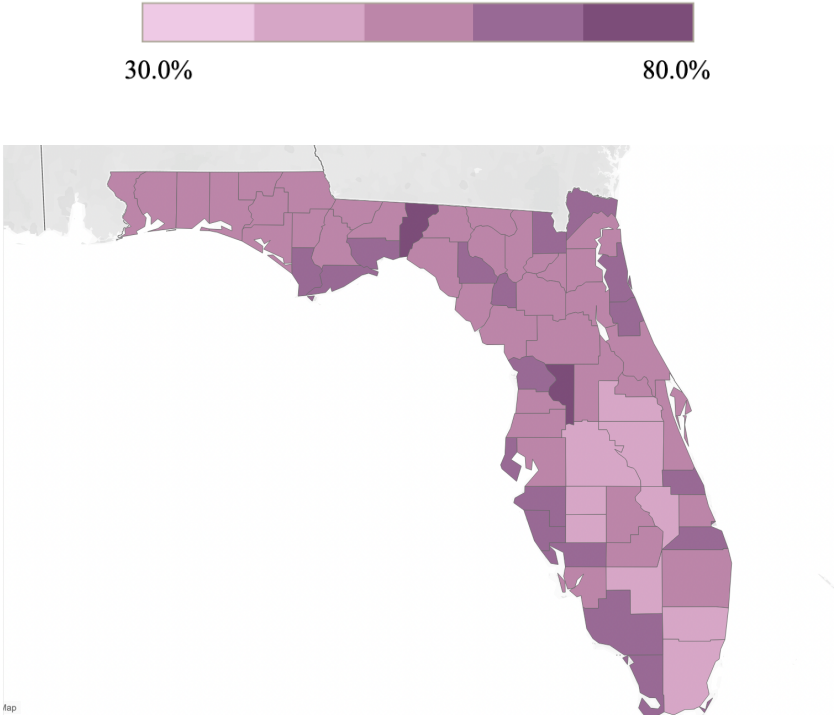


Figure 3: Florida Voter Turnout Rate by County (2022)



Ultimately, it is clear that voter turnout decreased in nearly all counties across the state of Florida between 2018 and 2022. Voting rights groups believe that the decrease in voter turnout is due to significant changes in voting laws which disproportionately impact voters of color, disabled voters, and young voters by intimidating potential voters, making it more difficult to turn in a ballot to a drop box, and more. In order to learn more about the impacts of laws on voter turnout, it is essential to examine the turnout data by demographic breakdowns including race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status in order to understand in which populations voter turnout decreased, zooming in from the county level to specific population groups. We have recently acquired new data that should be able to provide us with these answers. Further research should consider not only voter turnout on election day and during early voting, but also rejection rates for vote-by-mail ballots and changes in numbers of registered voters. News sources suggest attention should also be focused on campaign tactics and monetary investments from political parties into the state of Florida which may also impact voter turnout and registration (Prazan).

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