

2012 Florida Policy Issues and Elections¹

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Introduction

The 2012 session of the Florida Legislature is rapidly approaching and the 2012 federal, state, and county elections are only about one year off. As in previous years, the results of the legislative session and the elections will have significant implications for policy decisions at the state and county level in Florida. The state legislative session will convene early in 2012 to ensure that the legislature's redistricting plan is passed in time to meet the Florida Supreme Court's deadline to approve the plan. The legislative session will convene on January 10, 2012, rather than on the typical start date in March. Some of the same policy issues debated in prior years still remain hot issues today. The purpose and intent of this fact sheet is to explain some of the 2012 policy issues and to encourage resident voters to begin thinking and educating themselves on these issues.

2012 Policy Issues

Legislative Reapportionment and Redistricting

The reapportionment ("... the number of seats each state is entitled in the U.S. House of Representatives based on the decennial census") of congressional districts and the resulting redistricting ("redistricting revises the geographic boundaries within a state from which people elect their representatives") will probably be one of the top, if not the top, policy issue in 2012 (Quotes are from <http://www.census.gov/mso/www/rsf/apportionment/sld013.htm>). In spite of the state's relatively "slow growth" recently, Florida

will gain two congressional seats based on the 2010 Census of Population. Florida's constitution requires the state legislature, in the second year following each decennial census, to reapportion Florida's state and congressional districts (redistrict political boundaries by drawing new political boundary maps) to reflect the new population information provided by the 2010 census. The task is to be completed by the end of 2012. This means the state legislature will have to alter the current political boundaries to form two new federal legislative districts and also draw new state legislative districts keeping the population of the various districts close to equal (based on the 2010 decennial census).

Federal, State, County, and Local Elections

At the federal level, Floridians will have the opportunity to elect members to both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Floridians will have the opportunity, as they do every two years, to elect the state's new 27-member congressional delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives. These federal representatives are elected by district which means voters can only vote for candidates who represent the district in which they reside. (A district is the geographical area from which a state senator, representative, or congressman is elected. The boundaries of state legislative and congressional districts are re-drawn after each decennial census. Legislative and congressional districts are not matching.)

Floridians also will have the opportunity to elect a U.S. senator to represent the state for a six-year term. The senate

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seat Floridians will be filling is currently held by Senator Bill Nelson.

At the state level, Floridians will have the opportunity to elect members to the Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate. Article III, Section 15(b) of the Florida Constitution specifies that members of the Florida House of Representatives shall be elected for terms of two years in each even-numbered year. Thus, in 2012, all 120 seats in the Florida House of Representative are up for election. Article III, Section 15(a) of the Florida Constitution specifies that in even-numbered years, divisible by four, Florida senators from odd-numbered Florida senate districts (1,3,5,7,9,...39) will be elected by voters in the state.

At the local level, Floridians will have the opportunity to elect county commissioners, city and school boards members, and other local elected boards. Although they are sometimes unnoticed and forgotten, over 180 county commissioners will be elected in 2012. These individuals are the lead policy and decision makers in Florida's 67 counties. Florida Statute 100.041(2)(a) states that "each county commissioner from an odd-numbered district shall be elected at the general election in each even-numbered year the number of which is a multiple of four." For complete information on local election information, individuals should contact their county supervisor of elections.

Constitutional Amendments

Voters in 2012 will also have the opportunity to vote on proposed state constitutional amendments. As of July 1, 2011, seven amendments have been proposed by the state legislature. However, the number of proposed amendments you see on your ballot could be different. This is because proposed amendments could be added by either the legislature during the 2012 session or by citizen-led initiatives, or some of these proposed amendments could be removed because of legal challenges. The 2012 proposed constitutional amendments are:

- Amendment #1: HEALTH CARE SERVICES
- Amendment #2: VETERANS DISABLED DUE TO COMBAT INJURY; HOMESTEAD PROPERTY TAX DISCOUNT
- Amendment #3: STATE GOVERNMENT REVENUE LIMITATION
- Amendment #4: PROPERTY TAX LIMITATIONS; PROPERTY VALUE DECLINE; REDUCTION FOR

NONHOMESTEAD ASSESSMENT INCREASES;
DELAY OF SCHEDULED REPEAL

- Amendment #5: STATE COURTS
- Amendment #6: PROHIBITION ON PUBLIC FUNDING OF ABORTIONS; CONSTRUCTION OF ABORTION RIGHTS
- Amendment #7: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

For those who want to get an early start on educating themselves about the proposed amendments they will vote on in the 2012 general election, generic information is currently available on the Florida Department of State, Division of Elections web page at <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/initiatives/initiativelist.asp?year=2012&initstatus=ALL&MadeBallot=Y&ElecType=GEN>.

Also at Stake

Other policy issues, some addressed in the 2011 session, will continue to evolve and may need to be followed. Included among this group of issues are:

- **Fiscal and Budget Issues** – Although maybe not as severe as in fiscal year 2010–2011, tax revenues are still expected to be tight. Economic recovery and growth has been slower than anticipated by some at the federal, state, and local government levels. Unlike the federal budget, state and local budgets must be balanced, so expenses and revenues must be as close to equal as possible. As a result of this, there are many issues that need to be considered. For example, how much will revenue grow and, if revenue does not increase rapidly enough, what services or programs might need to be reduced or eliminated? Are the state and local governments providing needed services at desired levels? Is there a necessity for "right-sizing" government programs at the state and local levels?
- **Health Care Issues** – Significant amounts of policy issues on the health care topic, first generated at the federal level, "trickle down" to state and local governments. In fact, proposed Amendment #1 to the Florida Constitution is related to the federal government proposed health policies. These issues will probably be on-going for years. Some of the issues that may be addressed are rapidly rising costs, large numbers of people without insurance, the aging of the population, the increased numbers of residents eligible for Medicare/Medicaid, and the large shares of national and state budgets expended on health care issues.

Economic Development Issues

Although current economic data appear to affirm that both national and state economic conditions are improving, the previous economic downturn still focuses attention on economic development in the state, counties, and cities. Job creation remains on everyone's mind. Economic data indicate that Florida still lags (is higher) national trends, especially in unemployment. In 2011, the state legislature passed and the governor signed Senate Bill 2156, creating a new state agency, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

The new department began taking shape October 1, 2011. A primary focus of the reorganization was to improve economic development efficiency in the state. Further, the legislature aimed to increase accountability of that effort by making the department an executive office of the governor.

Several internal issues with respect to this reorganization will need to be watched. Will the reorganization improve effectiveness and accountability? What path(s) will economic development growth take? Will there be recruitment of firms, entrepreneurial approaches, or economic development incentives? If so, what will these actions cost and for how long will we pursue them? Also, it is not unusual in reorganizations such as this that unintended errors ("glitches") were present in the approved legislation. If that happened, expect new legislation to correct those "glitches."

Growth Management, Land Use, Water, and Environmental Issues

These remain big issues in Florida almost every year. State population continues to grow, but presently does so at a pace slower than five to ten years ago. Many growth management issues have been shifted from the state to the local government level. Legislation passed and signed during the 2011 legislative session also reorganized the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). On October 1, 2011, DCA was shifted into the newest state agency, the aforementioned Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO). The move designates a Division of Community Development within DEO (CS/HB 7207ER).

Water concerns internal to the state and with neighboring states (Georgia and Alabama) remain important policy issues. Water concerns may seem larger in 2012 as state growth is expected to increase again at a slightly more rapid pace at a time of low annual rainfall totals in the region. In 2011, the governor signed Senate Bill 2142. [Senate Bill 2142](#) limits the amount of ad valorem property taxes that can be collected by the Florida Water Management Districts.

Statewide, the governor's office estimates a property tax savings around \$210 million for Florida residential and commercial property (news release by Florida Governor's Office, <http://www.flgov.com/2011/06/22/210-5-million-tax-cut-governor-scott-signs-property-tax-relief-bill/>). The full implications of this action, in terms of services provided and staffing of the districts, remain unknown.

Preparing for 2012: Your Legislators and You

Legislative committees in both the Florida Senate and House of Representatives began meeting in late September 2011 to begin preparations for the 2012 session. Over 300 bills have already been filed, and most have been referred to committees for discussion. Although at the time of this writing the governor's office had not yet released a formal list of priority policy issues they would like addressed in the 2012 session, it is not unreasonable to expect that items such as further tax relief (corporate income tax reductions) and immigration policy will remain top priorities in the executive branch of state government.

Educate Yourself about the Candidates and the Issues

It is never too early to start educating yourself about the issues, especially issues you directly will be asked to vote on. More informed citizens are capable of making more informed policy decisions. More informed policy decisions are thought to be preferable to uninformed choices. While educating yourself about issues, you would ideally identify the policy issue being considered; alternative methods of addressing the policy issue; and the consequences, both pro and con, of each policy alternative that might be considered. This ideally would be done on both a personal and "society-at-large" basis.

Even though the primary elections seem a distant several months away and the general election will not take place until November 2012, you need not wait to familiarize yourself with those running for office. Several candidates, and even potential candidates, have already indicated they are running for statewide races, or local government elected positions.

For national and statewide races, stay informed by checking the Florida Secretary of State website at <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/candidate/Index.asp>. For local government candidates, keep in touch with or contact the local supervisor of elections office for information. As mentioned previously, for basic early information on the proposed

state constitutional amendments, refer to the Florida Department of State website at <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/initiatives/initiativelist.asp?year=2012&initstatus=ALL&MadeBallot=Y&ElecType=GEN>.

Voter Registration and Voting

Without taking that first essential step—registering to vote—your statement on who is elected or what policies they might enact in future years cannot be counted. You can register to vote by contacting the Supervisor of Elections Office in your county. Look in the blue pages of your local phonebook under “County Government” specifically for *elections* or *voter registration* and call for more information. Florida residents can also find more details online at the Florida Secretary of State website at <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/>.

The primary elections are scheduled for August 14, 2012, and the general election will be on November 6, 2012. It is anticipated that the presidential preference primary will be held for Florida voters on January 31, 2012. Since 2012 is a presidential election year, more people are expected to vote than in non-presidential election years.

Summary

In 2012, Florida state and local governments will be adopting policies on a variety of issues that will have lasting impacts in the state. Florida residents eligible to vote need to be engaged and to educate themselves about the candidates running for office and the important policy issues being debated. Then they need to vote in the primary and general elections. Remember, policy choices at the federal, state, and local government level are made by those elected and that those elected are sometimes placed in those positions by Florida citizens who fail to vote.

Also in 2012, Floridians will be able to vote for candidates to fill a U.S. Senate seat, all Florida Congressional seats, all 120 seats in the Florida House of Representatives, odd-numbered district Florida Senate seats, the majority of the county commissioners in the state, and an unknown number of city and school board seats. Many important future policy decisions will be made by those elected. It is important for Floridians to become engaged in the elections and the policies made by those elected.

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