

**Hiep Nguyen**

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**From:** Ellen Plendl  
**Sent:** Thursday, September 8, 2022 1:56 PM  
**To:** Consumer Correspondence  
**Subject:** Docket No. 20220000  
**Attachments:** Consumer Inquiry - Florida Power & Light Company; FPL direct access to the Governor's mansion!; FPL self-interest contrary to men of faith convictions on the common good; home solar panels and FPL's alleged campaign of disinformation and misinformation; Thanks to FPL's dirty politics, paying the light bill is more nauseating than ever

See attached customer correspondence and reply for Docket No. 20220000.

## Hiep Nguyen

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**From:** Ellen Plendl  
**Sent:** Thursday, September 8, 2022 1:51 PM  
**To:** 'Beatrice Balboa'  
**Subject:** Consumer Inquiry - Florida Power & Light Company

Ms. Beatrice Balboa  
beatricebalboa@gmail.com

Dear Ms. Balboa:

This is in response to your August 26, August 28, September 4, and September 8 emails to the Florida Public Service Commission (FPSC) regarding Florida Power & Light Company (FPL).

We will add your feedback and the articles you shared to our public record.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at 1-800-342-3552 or by fax at 1-800-511-0809.

Sincerely,

Ellen Plendl  
Regulatory Consultant  
Florida Public Service Commission  
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach  
1-800-342-3552 (phone)  
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

## Hiep Nguyen

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**From:** Beatrice Balboa <beatricebalboa@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Thursday, September 8, 2022 1:26 PM  
**To:** Ellen Plendl  
**Subject:** FPL direct access to the Governor's mansion?!  
**Attachments:** 'Money talks'\_ DeSantis goes after small-scale voter crimes, is silent on FPL and Matrix.pdf; DeSantis targets voters, not dark money, in election fraud probe.pdf

Thursday 8 September 2022 1330 hours

Ellen Plendl  
Regulatory Consultant  
Florida Public Service Commission  
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach  
1-800-342-3552 (phone)  
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my ongoing deepest disappointment that the electrical utility industrial sector continues to mismanage the electrical infrastructure throughout the State of Florida despite given unfettered access to elected and appointed government officials and agencies in the furtherance of policies and agendas in pursuing poorly thought out sourcing of energy resources and a decidedly anti-consumer stance with the rate-paying public across the board. Ongoing investigations continue undercover the long-standing practices by these captains of industry to extract ever larger fees and electrical rates to aggrandize their oversized ambitions by direct and indirect political arrangements in backrooms.

The attached documentation clearly indicates the ongoing conditions of the electrical infrastructure in Southern Florida in which the ratepayers are in harm's way. In addition, there are strong allegations that the senior leadership of the executive branch of the State of Florida are working either FOR or UNDER directives, instructions and/or orders from the electrical utility industrial sector captains of industry.

men of faith took deep exception to the State of Florida energy overlords and current public energy policies actively pursued by the State of Florida leading to additional financial burdens to ratepayers and residents of the State of Florida:

Please place these observations and articles in the appropriate docket to underscore the overwhelmingly calculated cold-hearted manner that these captains seem to influence the very elected/appointed representatives that should, instead, be seeking to comfort their constituents day-to-day hardships to pay for the aggrandizement of these out sized economic sectors.

Thank you for your time in these matters and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Beatrice Balboa  
1010 South Ocean Boulevard, Unit 1008  
Pompano Beach, FL 33062-6631  
USA

## Hiep Nguyen

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**From:** Beatrice Balboa <beatricebalboa@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Sunday, September 4, 2022 11:22 AM  
**To:** Ellen Plendl  
**Subject:** FPL self-interest contrary to men of faith convictions on the common good  
**Attachments:** Want to reduce electricity bills\_ Turn up lobbying efforts \_ Opinion.pdf

Sunday 4 September 2022 1130 hours

Ellen Plendl  
Regulatory Consultant  
Florida Public Service Commission  
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach  
1-800-342-3552 (phone)  
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

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High electricity bills add to the crippling financial burdens many Floridians are experiencing now, caught between historic inflation and higher prices at the pump. As a pastor, I have over time helped more Floridians pay unaffordable electricity bills than any other financial challenge.

Why is this? Simply: outdated public policy. It's time to change course and embrace a lower-cost, lower-risk, cleaner energy future. To love my neighbors in need means both helping them out in a pinch and ending whatever is pinching them. And bad public policy is pinching Floridians hard.

Floridians have some of the highest electricity bills in the nation and need help reducing their energy use. Yet our state indulges some of the

nation's worst-performing electric utilities when it comes to helping customers reduce energy use through utility-led energy efficiency programs.

Outdated energy efficiency policies at the Florida Public Service Commission – the agency that sets energy savings goals for the state's largest power companies – are a roadblock to commonsense energy solutions that would help everybody, and the environment, too.

Energy efficiency improvements, such as upgrading the A/C, adding insulation, reglazing windows, or using LED lighting, reduce energy use and make homes more comfortable, safe, and secure. These upgrades also help reduce overall electricity consumption, which means the utility burns less fossil fuel to generate electricity.

The energy savings would be a big win for customers by lowering their bills, and for the environment by reducing harmful emissions that threaten our health and exacerbate the global climate crisis.

Your power company is required to provide families and businesses with meaningful, cost-effective energy efficiency programs that help reduce overall electricity consumption. We're supposed to be able to use less energy and save money on power bills. Yet Florida's programs fall terribly short of the mark.

As one of the nation's largest consumers of energy, Florida is nevertheless one of the least energy-efficient states. ACEEE's 2020 Utility Energy Efficiency Scorecard ranked the state's three largest investor-owned electric utilities – Tampa Electric Company, Duke Energy Florida, and Florida Power & Light – at 46th, 48th, and 51st out of the 52 largest utilities nationwide in terms of program performance and savings. Those ratings are no accident. Utilities perform as public policies allow them.

The culprit is badly outdated state policies on setting energy efficiency goals for the state's largest utilities. The policies were last updated before cell phones became popular – nearly 30 years ago. Every state in the nation has moved toward policies that require innovative and cost-effective energy solutions – all but for Florida.

The power companies willingly use the outdated policies as an excuse to do the least amount possible in capturing energy savings for customers. Current policies are wrongly rewarding poor energy savings performance, and the Public Services Commission must up its game on smarter energy consumption.

Help could be on the way. The Commission is finally revisiting these outdated policies. The commissioners are appointed by the governor, and we need them to help get hard-working families off the high-bill treadmill by modernizing energy efficiency policies.

We are called to care wisely for God's creation and our neighbors. Scaling up energy efficiency is the quickest, cheapest, and cleanest way to meet customer energy demand and reduce emissions that are harming our natural environment and local communities. By using energy smarter, we can ensure energy savings for families while also protecting our air, water, and land for future generations.

Please place these observations and articles in the appropriate docket to underscore the overwhelmingly calculated cold-hearted manner that these captains seem to influence the very elected/appointed representatives that should, instead, be seeking to comfort their constituents day-to-day hardships to pay for the aggrandizement of these out sized economic sectors.

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Sincerely,  
Beatrice Balboa  
1010 South Ocean Boulevard, Unit 1008  
Pompano Beach, FL 33062-6631  
USA

## Hiiep Nguyen

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**From:** Beatrice Balboa <beatricebalboa@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Sunday, August 28, 2022 3:24 PM  
**To:** Ellen Plendl  
**Subject:** home solar panels and FPL's alleged campaign of disinformation and misinformation  
**Attachments:** Installing rooftop solar panels can get your home insurance canceled.pdf; Installing rooftop solar panels can get your home insurance canceled [South Florida Sun-Sentinel] – InsuranceNewsNet.pdf

Sunday 28 August 2022 1530 hours

Ellen Plendl  
Regulatory Consultant  
Florida Public Service Commission  
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach  
1-800-342-3552 (phone)  
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

To whom it may concern,

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The attached documentation clearly indicates the ongoing conditions of the electrical infrastructure in Southern Florida in which the ratepayers are in harm's way. In addition, the alleged spread of misinformation and disinformation regarding solar panel infrastructure at home residences is leading to additional financial burdens to ratepayers and residents of the State of Florida.

Please place these observations and articles in the appropriate docket to underscore the overwhelmingly calculated cold-hearted manner that these captains seem to influence the very elected/appointed representatives that should, instead, be seeking to comfort their constituents day-to-day hardships to pay for the aggrandizement of these out sized economic sectors.

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Sincerely,  
Beatrice Balboa  
1010 South Ocean Boulevard, Unit 1008  
Pompano Beach, FL 33062-6631  
USA

## Hiep Nguyen

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**From:** Beatrice Balboa <beatricebalboa@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Friday, August 26, 2022 11:31 AM  
**To:** Ellen Plendl  
**Subject:** Thanks to FPL's dirty politics, paying the light bill is more nauseating than ever  
**Attachments:** Thanks to FPL's dirty politics, paying the light bill is more nauseating than ever \_ Opinion.pdf

Friday 26 August 2022 1130 hours

Ellen Plendl  
Regulatory Consultant  
Florida Public Service Commission  
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach  
1-800-342-3552 (phone)  
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

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Thank you for your time in these matters and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Beatrice Balboa  
1010 South Ocean Boulevard, Unit 1008  
Pompano Beach, FL 33062-6631  
USA



# Thanks to FPL's dirty politics, paying the light bill is more nauseating than ever | Opinion



**Miami Herald**

FABIOLA SANTIAGO

August 26, 2022, 6:00 AM

Welcome to Florida, where even the electricity you consume comes with a side of dirty, secretive — and most likely, illegal — political gangsterism.

It's one thing for a monopoly like Florida Power & Light to lobby lawmakers to obtain favorable policies for its business — and quite another to make a mockery of our supposedly democratic political system.

That's what the nation's largest electric utility tried to do through a hired political consultant in a 2018 Miami-Dade County Commission race, taking possibly illegal action to change the outcome, according to [leaked documents](#) obtained by the Miami Herald.

Had FPL and political consultant Jeff Pitts succeeded, they would have derailed the political career of now Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava — a [competent, compassionate leader](#) who is the best thing to happen to county government in a long time.

Levine Cava's crime in FPL's eyes? She cares for the environment and was — and remains — a vigilant, vocal watchdog of [FPL's Turkey Point](#) nuclear plant in South Dade.

For her concern that people not drink contaminated water or turn into toast, Pitts funneled undisclosed funds, which is against the law, to prop up an unknown Democratic competitor, Johnathan Burke, to siphon off votes from Levine Cava in the District 8 commission race.

**[READ MORE: 'Our plan might have paid off': How FPL dollars secretly funded a spoiler vs. Levine Cava](#)**

Of course, Levine Cava was hardly alone on the company's hit list.

A trail of leaked records shows that the company tried to take out political contenders, opponents and a handful of inconvenient investigative journalists across the state whose job is to unravel the shenanigans behind the profitable industry of delivering power to Floridians.

Wrongdoing by FPL during elections in other parts of the state, including Seminole, Volusia and Duval counties, has been recently reported, in addition to the Miami Herald, by the [Orlando Sentinel](#) and The Florida Times-Union.

In all cases, the company used the same pit bull of a political consultant, Pitts, former CEO of Matrix LLC, now in a fight with Joe Perkins, founder of the Alabama-based firm, which lobbies for electric companies all over the South.

### **Eliminating a pro-solar Miami senator**

FPL also went after — and succeeded in eliminating — another public servant working on behalf of the public's interest, former state Sen. José Javier Rodríguez, after the Miami Democrat proposed legislation to expand rooftop solar power that cut into company profits.

FPL wants no independent vendors of solar, as Rodríguez proposed in 2019. It is seeking to monopolize solar power [as it does electricity](#) along most of the east coast of Florida, the agricultural southern and eastern Lake Okeechobee, the lower west coast and parts of central, north central, and northwest Florida.

“JJR at it again. I want you to make his life a living hell . . . seriously,” FPL CEO Eric Silagy wrote in a 2019 email to two of his company vice presidents.

His wish was delegated to Pitts (now in a war with Matrix founder Perkins) — and the LLC-funded political committees that paid for advertisements for the sham candidate with the same last name, Rodríguez, allegedly recruited by disgraced former legislator Frank Artiles.

Former Sen. Rodríguez, nominated by President Biden to become assistant secretary for employment and training at the Department of Labor, lost the election by a handful of votes to a neophyte Republican who embarrassed herself several times during culture-war debates last legislative season.

In other words, the voters of Miami's Senate District 37 — confused by a barrage of FPL-funded ads delivered via Matrix — lost a capable senator and are now represented by a person who can hardly verbalize coherent thoughts.

Voters, you were fooled by FPL as much as you were by the Republican Party behind him.

### **Attacks, surveillance of journalists**

Another FPL-funded tactic is to launch underhanded attacks against reporters investigating its operational shenanigans and influence peddling.

The company launched a website dedicated to attacking the Miami Herald's respected Tallahassee bureau chief [Mary Ellen Klas](#) and accusing her of “anti-utility bias” for doing her job exceptionally well. And it [took over a Florida news site](#), The Capitolist, and used it to discredit critics.

Most famously, while working for FPL, Pitts had employees follow and photograph the private life of Times-Union [metro columnist Nate Monroe](#), whose investigative work doomed the privatization of community-owned Jacksonville electric provider, JEA — and exposed the corruption behind the attempted sale.

FPL denied ordering the “hit,” but Pitts emailed the surveillance report on Monroe to FPL's vice president of state legislative affairs in October 2019. It included a photo of the journalist and his then-girlfriend, now wife and mother of his child, walking their dog on Neptune Beach.

### **FPL's dark money**

FPL, through Pitts and the firm he worked for, sought to destroy people FPL viewed as enemies. Dogged reporting has brought into the limelight the role dark money plays in Florida government.

Like any other industry or registered individual, FPL has the right to lobby lawmakers seeking favorable decisions. And it has the right to fund — legally — political office-seekers.

But it doesn't have the right to thwart fair elections, as it has done through its consultants, by pouring millions secretly into political races since 2018, as the paper trail shows.

So thanks to FPL's delinquent politics, paying the light bill is now more nauseating than ever.

Here's the only way to stop the scoundrels: Vote armed with information about candidates, and ask questions about where they stand on solar power. FPL wants to constrict the state's growing rooftop solar industry.

Vote for competition, not to perpetuate a monopoly with unbridled power to pocket \$1 billion in tax cuts — and raise our rates with the blessing of Florida's Public Service Commission.

Competition — and open government elected by the people, not the dollars of a few — is supposed to be the American way.

# Installing rooftop solar panels can get your home insurance canceled [South Florida Sun-Sentinel]

*South Florida Sun  
Sentinel (FL)*

As electric bills surge and the federal government offers generous tax incentives for renewable energy investments, more and more Florida homeowners are seriously considering rooftop solar systems.

But in calculating system costs vs. electric bill savings, many would-be solar owners are neglecting to consider how a solar system will affect their home insurance bill — or how difficult it might be to find a company that will insure them at all.

And with insurance premiums skyrocketing for all Florida homeowners, solar customers who can obtain coverage might also find that the price increase will wipe out any energy-cost savings they expected from going solar.

“It’s a big deal and a lot of folks don’t realize that many carriers don’t accept solar panels,” says Dulce Suarez-Resnick, vice president at the Miami-based agency Acentria Insurance.

Oakland Park homeowner Holy Strawbridge learned this the hard way. She installed a modest 8,000 kilowatt system atop her home about two years ago and recently signed up for coverage with Edison Insurance Company. After the insurer sent an inspector to her home, she received a letter canceling her entire policy.

“I was shocked,” Strawbridge said. “I’ve never filed an insurance claim and I’ve lived in this house since 2001.”

The reasons cited in the cancellation letter sent by Edison: Her solar panels are ineligible for coverage due to the age of her roof (11 years) and because she has a tile roof.

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Florida Power & Light's net metering contract requires homeowners to take responsibility for all potential damages, says Ryan Papy, president of Palmetto Bay-based Keyes Insurance. "So if there's a surge running through your panels that causes damage to the grid or other homes, the client is responsible."

Solar installers and advocates call that justification unfounded. They say all equipment used to connect rooftop solar systems to the grid comply with state building and electrical codes and are inspected by utilities before new systems are activated. Utilities also have authority to come onto solar owners' properties and disconnect them if they suspect any safety issues, they say.

Solar advocates wonder if the net metering concerns are just excuse insurers are giving to justify dropping customers.

Many insurers who operate in Florida, faced with mounting losses, have been dropping or nonrenewing policies to reduce the amount of overall risk they carry on their books of business. In some cases, state insurance regulators have ordered insurers to shed policies so they can afford to purchase reinsurance — insurance that insurers must carry to be able to pay all claims after a catastrophe.

Justin Hoysradt, president of Vinyasun, a solar installation company based in West Palm Beach, says the potential dangers of backfeeding are exaggerated.

Since 2006, all power-producing inverters have complied with an electrical standard called U.L. 1741, Hoysradt said. This standard requires solar system inverters to be able to detect utility outages or any odd voltage disruption and automatically disconnect the solar systems from the grid.

Hoysradt says he is unaware of any documented instance of injury or damage from a properly installed UL 1741-certified inverter.

The cut-off technology is so dependable that utilities recently removed a requirement that solar systems be equipped with separate redundant remote power-off switches, he said.

Until about a year ago, Hoysradt rarely heard customers complain that they couldn't find or keep insurance because of their solar systems. Now, at least one potential customer a day says their insurer could not guarantee they wouldn't be dropped if they install solar, he said.

Other insurers have told homeowners that net metering turns them into commercial utilities and no longer eligible for homeowner insurance policies, said Heaven Campbell, Florida program directors for Solar United Neighbors, a nationwide nonprofit that helps solar customers form co-ops to secure better pricing.

Campbell says her organization has documented about 60 homeowner complaints over the past year. They either say they've been cancelled after installing solar panels or told they would no longer be eligible for coverage if they install panels, she said.

Insurer cites numerous concerns

Olympus Insurance laid out an extensive list of concerns about property and liability exposures in a 2020 filing with the Office of Insurance Regulation, while seeking approval to exclude solar systems from the risks it must cover.

They included increase exposure for damage due to wind uplift when solar panels are attached to a roof, increased exposure for wind or hail damage to the solar system itself, fire hazards from loose or poorly connected parts or wires, increased risk of electrocution, presence of toxic materials and byproducts of the panels themselves, and potential liability associated with backfeeding to the grid.

Without commenting on the validity of the concerns, the Office of Insurance Regulation told Olympus it could not allow a broad mandatory exclusion for coverage of solar unless the company provided an option for solar owners to “buy back” the coverage at an increased price. Olympus withdrew the filing. It could not be immediately determined from the office’s filing database whether the company resubmitted it with the buy-back option.

Campbell disputes claims that rooftop solar systems make roofs more susceptible to wind uplift during hurricanes. She said after Hurricane Michael struck the Panhandle in October 2018, many roofs with solar panels remained intact amid roofs without solar panels that were destroyed.

Solar United Neighbors’ website contains numerous photos of installations that held up in storms that damaged roofs of surrounding homes. Campbell says modern building codes actually make roofs with solar panels better able to withstand winds.

Paul Handerhan, president of the consumer focused Federal Association for Insurance Reform, said concerns about wind uplift stem from the potential for increased damage if solar panels and roofs are torn from homes together.

Suarez-Resnick concurs: “With stronger winds like a Category 3 hurricane, you might have much more damage if panels go flying and land on your neighbor’s roof or car.”

Companies that do insure rooftop solar systems are allowed to set strict conditions for that coverage, filings show.

Edison, the company that cancelled Strawbridge’s policy, will only cover homes with solar systems that were installed after 2016, on shingle or metal roofs no older than 10 years, on flat roofs no older than five years, and produce no more 10 kilowatts of electricity, which is more or less the typical rooftop system capacity.

As Strawbridge found out, Edison will not insure solar systems mounted on clay or tile roofs. Stacey Giulianti, chief legal officer at Florida Peninsula Insurance Company, parent company of Edison, said, “We chose not to insure solar panels on tile roof homes due to the challenges presented by the attachment of the panels to the roofs. Most tile roof installations require attachment brackets which must pierce the tile roofs.”

Solar panels are routinely installed without piercing tiles, Hoysradt said. Many installers remove clay tiles at the point where solar posts attach to the roof and replace them with aluminum tiles that won’t break or crack when drilled.

Hoysradt noted that state licensing requirements for solar installers require knowledge of roofing, electrical and plumbing construction.

“We’re not just a bunch of people taking roofs apart with no experience,” he said. “There’s no reason for insurance carriers to not cover solar on a tile roof.”

Nevertheless, rooftop solar consumers can expect to find a hodgepodge of insurance rules unless and until the state legislature decides to enact common coverage standards.

Common standards for insuring solar?

The national trade organization Solar Energy Industries Association is working with fellow solar advocacy groups Florida SEIA, Solar United Neighbors and Vote Solar to reach out to insurers and try to develop legislation to eliminate confusion about insurance practices, said Will Giese, the association’s Southeast regional director.

The good news for Strawbridge and other solar owners is there are insurers that do not prohibit coverage of homes with solar systems or impose a long list of restrictions on coverage. They include state-owned Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the so-called “insurer of last resort.”

Citizens covers solar systems as part of the structure. No special endorsements or add-ons are required, spokesman Michael Peltier said. “They would just be added into the replacement value of the home,” he said. Of course, adding solar panels increases the value of a home, so homeowners can expect to pay a higher premium when they add solar.

One mistake a homeowner should never make: Installing a solar system without checking insurance options, Suarez-Resnick said. An agent can tell you whether your roof is nearing the end of its life and should be replaced first. It’s a pain to find new insurance, and it’s costly to remove and replace solar panels because Citizens or another insurer demands that you get a new roof.

Or you might look for a solar installer, like Universal Contracting and Solar, that specializes in bundling roof replacements and solar installations. You can get long-term financing and qualify for the 30% federal tax credit to offset cost of the combined job, says Jenifer Kempka, the company’s director of business development.

“Right now is the best time to go solar,” she said.





# Installing rooftop solar panels can get your home insurance canceled

Ron Hurtibise, South Florida Sun-Sentinel - 7h ago



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As electric bills surge and the federal government offers generous tax incentives for renewable energy investments, more and more Florida homeowners are seriously considering rooftop solar systems.



Holly Strawbridge of Oakland Park shows her rooftop solar panels. She's one of an increasing number of solar owners who say their insurers won't cover homes with solar systems.

© Carline Jean / South Florida/South Florida Sun-Sentinel/TNS

But in calculating system costs vs. electric bill savings, many would-be solar owners are neglecting to consider how a solar system will affect their home insurance bill — or how difficult it might be to find a company that will insure them at all.

And with insurance premiums skyrocketing for all Florida homeowners, solar customers who can obtain coverage might also find that the price increase will wipe out any energy-cost savings they expected from going solar.



“It’s a big deal and a lot of folks don’t realize that many carriers don’t accept solar panels,” says Dulce Suarez-Resnick, vice president at the Miami-based agency Acentria Insurance.

Oakland Park homeowner Holy Strawbridge learned this the hard way. She installed a modest 8,000 kilowatt system atop her home about two years ago and recently signed up for coverage with Edison Insurance Company. After the insurer sent an inspector to her home, she received a letter canceling her entire policy.

“I was shocked,” Strawbridge said. “I’ve never filed an insurance claim and I’ve lived in this house since 2001.”

The reasons cited in the cancellation letter sent by Edison: Her solar panels are ineligible for coverage due to the age of her roof (11 years) and because she has a tile roof.

Those aren’t the only reasons insurers won’t cover rooftop solar systems, according to interviews with solar installers, solar energy advocates, and insurance agents. Insurers who do business in Florida offer a wide variety of reasons for refusing to insure homes with them.

## Net metering flagged by insurers

Increasingly, insurers are claiming that solar systems with net metering connections to utilities — which is virtually all of them in Florida — pose a unique risk of injury to line workers and damage to the utility grid.

Florida Power & Light’s net metering contract requires homeowners to take responsibility for all potential damages, says Ryan Papy, president of Palmetto Bay-based Keyes Insurance. “So if there’s a surge running through your panels that causes damage to the grid or other homes, the client is responsible.”

Solar installers and advocates call that justification unfounded. They say all equipment used to connect rooftop solar systems to the grid comply with state building and electrical codes and are inspected by utilities before new systems are activated. Utilities also have authority to come onto solar owners’ properties and disconnect them if they suspect any safety issues, they say.

Solar advocates wonder if the net metering concerns are just excuse insurers are giving to justify dropping customers.

Many insurers who operate in Florida, faced with mounting losses, have been dropping or nonrenewing policies to reduce the amount of overall risk they carry on their books of business. In some cases, state insurance regulators have ordered insurers to shed policies so they can afford to purchase reinsurance — insurance that insurers must carry to be able to pay all claims after a catastrophe.

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solar panels better able to withstand winds.

Paul Handerhan, president of the consumer focused Federal Association for Insurance Reform, said concerns about wind uplift stem from the potential for increased damage if solar panels and roofs are torn from homes together.

Suarez-Resnick concurs: "With stronger winds like a Category 3 hurricane, you might have much more damage if panels go flying and land on your neighbor's roof or car."

Companies that do insure rooftop solar systems are allowed to set strict conditions for that coverage, filings show.

Edison, the company that cancelled Strawbridge's policy, will only cover homes with solar systems that were installed after 2016, on shingle or metal roofs no older than 10 years, on flat roofs no older than five years, and produce no more 10 kilowatts of electricity, which is more or less the typical rooftop system capacity.

As Strawbridge found out, Edison will not insure solar systems mounted on clay or tile roofs. Stacey Giuliani, chief legal officer at Florida Peninsula Insurance Company, parent company of Edison, said, "We chose not to insure solar panels on tile roof homes due to the challenges presented by the attachment of the panels to the roofs. Most tile roof installations require attachment brackets which must pierce the tile roofs."

Solar panels are routinely installed without piercing tiles, Hoysradt said. Many installers remove clay tiles at the point where solar posts attach to the roof and replace them with aluminum tiles that won't break or crack when drilled.

Hoysradt noted that state licensing requirements for solar installers require knowledge of roofing, electrical and plumbing construction.

"We're not just a bunch of people taking roofs apart with no experience," he said. "There's no reason for insurance carriers to not cover solar on a tile roof."

Nevertheless, rooftop solar consumers can expect to find a hodgepodge of insurance rules unless and until the state legislature decides to enact common coverage standards.

## Common standards for insuring solar?

The national trade organization Solar Energy Industries Association is working with fellow solar advocacy groups Florida SEIA, Solar United Neighbors and Vote Solar to reach out to insurers and try to develop legislation to eliminate confusion about insurance practices, said Will Giese, the association's Southeast regional director.

The good news for Strawbridge and other solar owners is there are insurers that do not prohibit coverage of homes with solar systems or impose a long list of restrictions on coverage. They include state-owned

Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the so-called “insurer of last resort.”

Citizens covers solar systems as part of the structure. No special endorsements or add-ons are required, spokesman Michael Peltier said. “They would just be added into the replacement value of the home,” he said. Of course, adding solar panels increases the value of a home, so homeowners can expect to pay a higher premium when they add solar.

One mistake a homeowner should never make: Installing a solar system without checking insurance options, Suarez-Resnick said. An agent can tell you whether your roof is nearing the end of its life and should be replaced first. It’s a pain to find new insurance, and it’s costly to remove and replace solar panels because Citizens or another insurer demands that you get a new roof.

Or you might look for a solar installer, like Universal Contracting and Solar, that specializes in bundling roof replacements and solar installations. You can get long-term financing and qualify for the 30% federal tax credit to offset cost of the combined job, says Jenifer Kempka, the company’s director of business development.

“Right now is the best time to go solar,” she said.

# Want to reduce electricity bills? Turn up lobbying efforts | Opinion



**Rev. Dr. Russell L. Meyer**

Sun, September 4, 2022 at 6:00 AM · 3 min read



If you know anything about LED bulbs, it's likely you know that they are energy-efficient and long-lasting. If you're looking to save money on utility bills, bulb replacement, or reduce your carbon footprint, LED bulbs are a no-brainer.

High electricity bills add to the crippling financial burdens many Floridians are experiencing now, caught between historic inflation and higher prices at the pump. As a pastor, I have over time helped more Floridians pay unaffordable electricity bills than any other financial challenge.

Why is this? Simply: outdated public policy. It's time to change course and embrace a lower-cost, lower-risk, cleaner energy future. To love my neighbors in need means both helping them out in a pinch and ending whatever is pinching them. And bad public policy is pinching Floridians hard.

Floridians have some of the highest electricity bills in the nation and need help reducing their energy use. Yet our state indulges some of the nation's worst-performing electric utilities when it comes to helping customers reduce energy use through utility-led energy efficiency programs.

- ADVERTISEMENT -

Outdated energy efficiency policies at the Florida Public Service Commission – the agency that sets energy savings goals for the state's largest power companies – are a roadblock to commonsense energy solutions that would help everybody, and the environment, too.

Energy efficiency improvements, such as upgrading the A/C, adding insulation, reglazing windows, or using LED lighting, reduce energy use and make homes more comfortable, safe, and secure. These upgrades also help reduce overall electricity consumption, which means the utility burns less fossil fuel to generate electricity.

The energy savings would be a big win for customers by lowering their bills, and for the environment by reducing harmful emissions that threaten our health and exacerbate the global climate crisis.

Your power company is required to provide families and businesses with meaningful, cost-effective energy efficiency programs that help reduce overall electricity consumption. We're supposed to be able to use less energy and save money on power bills. Yet Florida's programs fall terribly short of the mark.

As one of the nation's largest consumers of energy, Florida is nevertheless one of the least energy-efficient states. ACEEE's 2020 Utility Energy Efficiency Scorecard ranked the state's three largest investor-owned electric utilities – Tampa Electric Company, Duke Energy Florida, and Florida Power & Light – at 46th, 48th, and 51st out of the 52 largest utilities nationwide in terms of program performance and savings. Those ratings are no accident. Utilities perform as public policies allow them.

The culprit is badly outdated state policies on setting energy efficiency goals for the state's largest utilities. The policies were last updated before cell phones became popular – nearly 30 years ago. Every state in the nation has moved toward policies that require innovative and cost-effective energy solutions – all but for Florida.

The power companies willingly use the outdated policies as an excuse to do the least amount possible in capturing energy savings for customers. Current policies are wrongly rewarding poor energy savings performance, and the Public Services Commission must up its game on smarter energy consumption.

Help could be on the way. The Commission is finally revisiting these outdated policies. The commissioners are appointed by the governor, and we need them to help get hard-working families off the high-bill treadmill by modernizing energy efficiency policies.

We are called to care wisely for God's creation and our neighbors. Scaling up energy efficiency is the quickest, cheapest, and cleanest way to meet customer energy demand and reduce emissions that are harming our natural environment and local communities. By using energy smarter, we can ensure energy savings for families while also protecting our air, water, and land for future generations.





Rev. Dr. Russell L. Meyer

*Rev. Dr. Russell L. Meyer is the Executive Director of the Florida Council of Churches, convener of the Florida Interfaith Climate Actions Network.*



# DeSantis targets voters, not dark money, in election fraud probe

DeSantis touted the arrests of individual voters. He has so far been quieter about campaign finance questions related to FPL and others.

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By **Mary Ellen Klas** *Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau*  
**Nicholas Nehamas** *Miami Herald*

Published Sep. 6 | Updated Sep. 6

SOUTH BAY, Fla. — Leo Grant Jr. couldn't stomach the bologna sandwich that guards offered him at a Palm Beach County jail on the morning of Aug. 18.

Grant, 55, hadn't faced prison food since 2004, and he couldn't believe he now found himself shackled and then locked up — for the crime of voting.

“That was a disgrace to me,” Grant said. “I’m a law-abiding citizen. I ain’t been to prison in 18 years.”

But at a campaign-style event later that day, Gov. Ron DeSantis described Grant and 19 other Floridians charged with illegal voting in harsh terms. “They’re going to pay the price,” said DeSantis, who left Florida the next day for a fundraising trip to Pennsylvania and Ohio, two swing states critical to his expected presidential run in 2024, where he again touted the arrests.

After spending three hours in jail, Grant returned to his South Bay apartment — in the impoverished heart of Florida’s sugar-growing country — 25 feet from the railroad tracks. He’s now facing five years in prison.

The charges mark what DeSantis called “the opening salvo” of his new Office of Elections Crimes and Security, which was set up on July 1 to investigate and prosecute election fraud.



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“This is just the first step; there’s many more in the pipeline,” said DeSantis, standing behind a lectern that said “Election Integrity.”

While the governor and his new election police force have targeted people like Grant, most of them Black, they have not similarly condemned or taken action against complex

schemes intended to manipulate Florida elections and linked to one of the state's most powerful corporations.



Leo Grant Jr., a South Bay resident charged with voter fraud, looks out the window in his house on Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2022, in South Bay, Fla. Grant got out of prison in 2004 for a felony and has turned his life around. Now, 18 years later, he was arrested for voter fraud after filing to vote with the state and being approved and sent a voter information card. [ ALIE SKOWRONSKI | Miami Herald ]

Over the past year, Juno Beach-based Florida Power & Light — a multibillion-dollar company headquartered 43 miles east and a world away from Grant's small home — has been the subject of a torrent of news stories revealing how its political consultants funneled money through nonprofit

groups and shell companies to manipulate elections and finance attacks on the utility's political foes.

Election law experts told the Times/Herald the payments were a potential violation of state campaign finance laws that ban the use of straw donors to shield the true source of campaign funds, as well as federal tax rules for nonprofits.

When asked whether those schemes would be investigated by the Office of Election Crimes and Security, Mark Ard, spokesperson for the office, said: "Violations of campaign financing ... are generally referred to the Florida Elections Commission."

Among the recipients of the funds was DeSantis' 2018 campaign. According to leaked documents, his political committee [received](#) \$25,000, channeled through a nonprofit that didn't have to reveal its donors.

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Going after individuals with little means — several of whom told the Times/Herald they had no idea they were breaking the law — while not prosecuting sophisticated attempts to subvert democratic processes is “reprehensible,” said Marvin Dunn, president of the Miami Center for Racial Justice at Barry University and a historian of race and civil rights in Florida.

“Powerful people rigging elections is far more dangerous than 20 people allegedly voting illegally,” Dunn said in an interview. “But power gets you privileges and exceptions that don’t apply to the rest of us. Money talks. Money is power. The people who’ve been charged with voter fraud have no power. ... DeSantis is making them into props for his reelection campaign and his bid for president.”

Dunn noted that county election offices had processed and accepted voter registration forms for Grant and the others without flagging them as ineligible, and that the state signed off.

Unlike the voters who said they didn't understand the law, FPL's executives and political consultants were clearly aware of the need to cloak their activities, according to a trove of documents leaked to the Times/Herald and other news organizations.

The documents come from inside Matrix, an Alabama-based political consulting firm that worked for FPL until last year. They reveal an operation carefully choreographed with a consistent goal: [Take down elected officials](#) who stood in the way of FPL's interests — without disclosing the company as the source of the funds while leaving enough distance to allow FPL, its high-level managers and its chief executive to deny involvement.

Emails show Matrix officials setting up friends and family as operators of nonprofit groups and then directing the

nonprofits' use as pipelines for campaign contributions.

Previous leaks to the [Orlando Sentinel](#) and the [Florida Times-Union](#) documented how Matrix, while in the employ of FPL, blew past ethical boundaries, including having a [Times-Union journalist tailed](#) by a private investigator and pumping resources into the campaigns of “spoiler candidates” geared to siphon votes from FPL’s political opponents.

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**RELATED:** [FPL funds secretly paid for a spoiler candidate in a 2018 Florida race](#)

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In one case, records show that Matrix worked to support a candidate with the same last name as a Democratic incumbent, José Javier Rodríguez, in an apparent effort to sow confusion, redirect votes and help a Republican win his Miami state Senate seat.

After reading a [news story](#) about a bill sponsored by Rodríguez that threatened FPL’s hold on the state solar



energy market, Eric Silagy, president and CEO of FPL, gave his top executives a clear order: “I want you to make his life a living hell....seriously,” he wrote in a Jan. 7, 2019, email.

The executives immediately forwarded the message to Matrix’s CEO, according to the documents leaked to the Times/Herald and other news organizations. The next year, Matrix directed the transfer of \$550,000 that in part paid for mailers backing the unknown challenger, Alexis Pedro Rodriguez, an auto parts dealer with no party affiliation. Despite not actively campaigning in the 2020 contest, Alexis Pedro Rodriguez received 6,300 votes. José Javier Rodríguez lost to the Republican in the race by 32.

Alexis Pedro Rodriguez was one of three alleged “ghost candidates” in the 2020 cycle whose campaigns were apparently designed to siphon votes from Democrats running for the Florida Senate. He has since pleaded guilty to two felony election law violations and is cooperating with prosecutors in a case brought by local authorities.

FPL has denied it had anything to do with its consultants' efforts to secretly influence that or other races and says it follows all campaign finance laws. The power company has said documents tying it to Matrix election schemes "could easily be fabricated" and has refused to comment on them.

"Regarding our corporate political contributions, we require that they comply with all applicable laws," said David Reuter, a spokesperson for FPL.

A lawyer for Jeff Pitts, CEO of Matrix at the time of the activities in question, blamed the accusations on Matrix founder Joe Perkins.

"These accusations are false, tiresome and a continuation of his slander and libelous attacks," the lawyer said. Perkins and Pitts, who left Matrix to form his own company that then took FPL's business from Matrix, were engaged in a bitter legal battle that was finally settled last week.

Saurav Ghosh, director of federal campaign finance reform at the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center in Washington, D.C., said that under the state and federal ban on straw donors, individuals and corporations are prohibited from

making political donations with the explicit intention of hiding themselves as the true source.

Matrix and FPL's apparent intent to use "financial resources to defeat a candidate without any disclosure to the public" would potentially violate such laws, he said. "That's election rigging."

Grant, who was investigated by DeSantis' new elections office, was among several arrested felons who told the Times/Herald they did not realize they were breaking the law.

Voter registration forms ask individuals to affirm that they are not felons — or if they were convicted of felonies to affirm that their rights have been restored. All of those arrested had served their time and on the forms incorrectly indicated that their right to vote had been restored. The state says their right to cast ballots would not have been restored because their previous convictions for murder or felony sexual offenses barred them from the voter system.

They are now facing two third-degree felony counts: submitting false voter registration information and voting as an unqualified elector in the 2020 election.

The governor's political opponents say no matter what happens between now and November, the arrests of Grant and others send a chilling message to former felons, even if they are eligible to cast ballots.

"Folks are going to be scared to vote," Grant said.

## **'Selective enforcement'**

DeSantis, a Republican, proposed Florida's 25-person Office of Election Crimes and Security a year ago, as he attempted to quell calls from Donald Trump supporters for the state to conduct an audit in response to baseless claims of a stolen election.

During the 2022 lawmaking session, Florida's Republican-led Legislature created a slimmed-down version of the

election police force within the Florida Department of State and tasked it “with investigating all election crimes in Florida.”

Daniel Smith, a University of Florida political science professor and frequent critic of the state’s enforcement of elections law, said authorities “have chosen to selectively enforce the law.”

Smith said the decision to go after “confused” former felons like Grant, but not powerful political consultants, whose efforts shifted thousands of votes away from FPL’s political foes, is an intentional choice by the DeSantis administration.

“It’s using the power of the state to selectively go after certain allegations of wrongdoing and turning a blind eye to ones where there’s actually more evidence of wrongdoing,” he said. “It just so happens they are targeting categories that tend to be more likely to involve minority voters and Democratic voters. The rules are not being applied uniformly across the state.”

Of the 19 people arrested on charges of election fraud, 12 are registered Democrats, four registered with no party affiliation and three registered as Republicans, according to a Times/Herald analysis of voter registration data. (As of this past weekend, one person had been charged but not yet arrested.)

Asked if the governor prioritized arrests of individual voters over examining more organized forms of election malfeasance and campaign finance violations, DeSantis spokesperson Bryan Griffin did not answer the question.

“As Gov. DeSantis has been repeatedly clear on the importance of election integrity, it should follow that it is well worthwhile to dedicate the necessary resources to accomplishing this.”

He did not respond to a request to elaborate and clarify if election integrity includes the enforcement of campaign finance laws.

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**RELATED:** [Florida arrested felons for election fraud. It also gave them voter IDs](#)

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## Fraud in The Villages

Hidden campaign finance schemes tied to FPL consultants at Matrix are not the only potentially illegal organized efforts that have not resulted in any action by the state as it vows to go after election fraud.

No charges have been filed against Republican Party canvassers who, according to a Times/Herald investigation, [switched the party affiliations](#) of more than 100 elderly Miami-Dade residents to Republican without their consent.

And a state Ethics Commission recommendation in October that the governor impose a \$20,000 fine against Alexis Pedro Rodriguez — the Matrix-backed “spoiler” in the Miami state Senate race — still awaits action by Gov. DeSantis 11 months later.

Meanwhile, a series of arrests this past year in the conservative retirement community of The Villages involved local residents who voted twice in 2020 — once in Florida and again in a different state. The case was handled by the local state attorney before the state formed the Office of Election Crimes, which is currently relying on agents detached from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to do investigations.

The three people arrested — all between the ages of 63 and 71, all registered Republicans — admitted to the crime.

Prosecutors offered them plea deals that will leave them with clean records — and presumably the right to vote.

They must first perform 50 hours of community service and get a grade of C or better in an adult civics class, according to court records. A fourth Villages resident was arrested in January on similar charges.

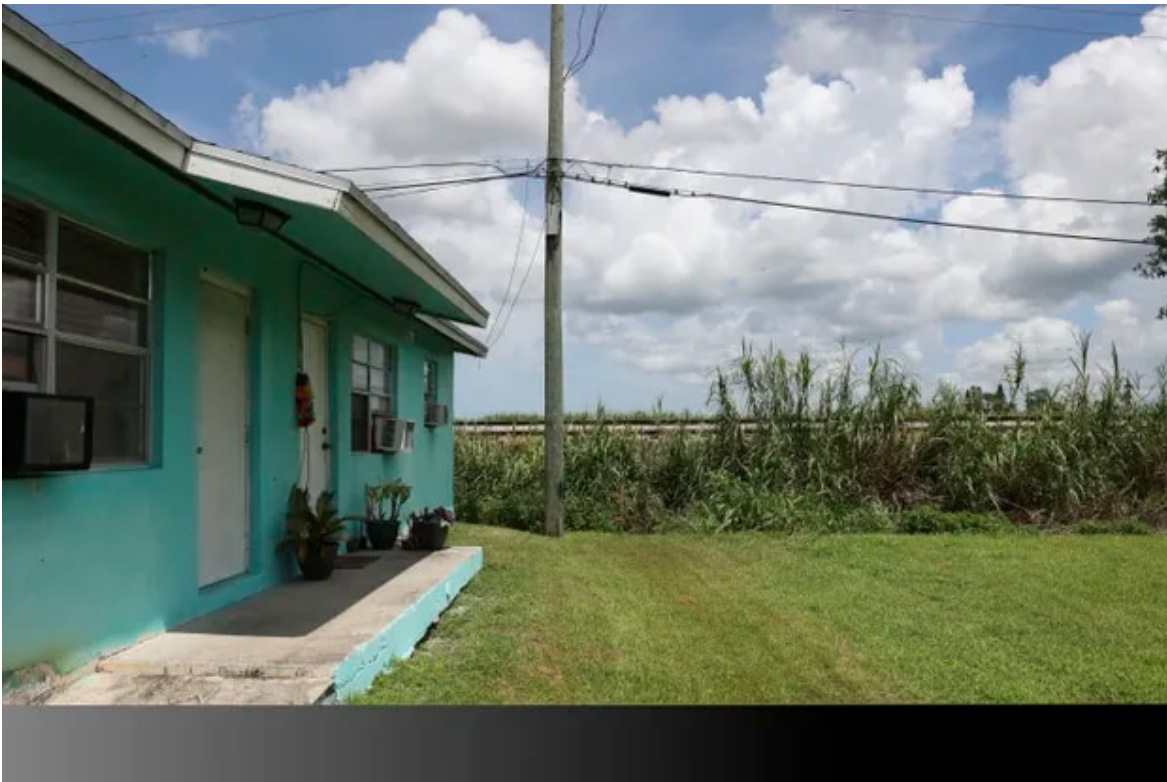
Grant and others arrested on the day of DeSantis' news conference have few resources and fear they won't get off so easily.



“I ain’t got no damn money for a lawyer,” said Grant, who is disabled and has diabetes and a pacemaker.

Records show he had stayed out of prison since 2004, when he finished a five-year stint for lewd assault. He teared up last week thinking about what his return to incarceration might do to his three sons — twins aged 14 and a 6-year-old.

Grant, who earned his GED in 2010, said he received a voter registration form in the mail unsolicited in 2020. He said he had no idea he was barred from voting and that he read the form over quickly before filling it out. He then had his application approved, received a voter registration card in the mail and was able to vote in the 2020 election. “They sent the voter registration card to me. That was their error and their mistake,” said Grant, referring to the government. “It’s like a setup. They made the mistake, but they are going to punish me.”



The house of Leo Grant Jr., a South Bay resident charged with voter fraud, sits next to the train tracks on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in South Bay, Fla. Grant got out of prison in 2004 for a felony and has turned his life around. Now, 18 years later, he was arrested for voter fraud after filing to vote with the state and being approved and sent a voter information card. [ ALIE SKOWRONSKI | askowronski@miamiherald.com ]

## **Who's at fault?**

Mixed messaging has contributed to the confusion, arrests and convictions over voting in Florida.

In 2018, Florida voters amended the state Constitution to end Florida's lifetime ban on voting for felons — with 64% casting ballots in favor of the initiative. The measure

specifically excluded those who had been convicted of murder, sexual assault and criminal sexual behavior.

The Legislature responded by requiring that felons who completed their sentences first pay all fees owed in relation to their crimes. The formerly incarcerated soon learned that there is no centralized location where they could learn what, if anything, they owed.

In a 2020 interview with the Times/Herald and ProPublica, then-Secretary of State Laurel Lee, a DeSantis appointee, said [under state law](#) it was her office's responsibility to screen felons wishing to vote and to inform county supervisors which individuals were ineligible.

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**RELATED:** [Florida ruled felons must pay to vote. Now it doesn't know how many can.](#)

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At the time Grant and the other 19 people filled out their registration applications, the state backlog to determine eligibility of felons was enormous. Until that backlog could

be cleared, former felons should be considered “eligible voters,” Lee said in the Oct. 5, 2020, interview.

At a news conference, DeSantis contradicted that view, saying the responsibility lies with county elections officials. Lee is no longer the secretary of state, having been replaced in May by Cord Byrd, a former Republican state lawmaker.

Sometimes government agencies have worked at cross-purposes. In July 2020, the [Alachua County Supervisor of Elections Office conducted a series of voter registration drives in the county jail](#) to encourage felons who had completed their terms to register. Two years later, Alachua prosecutors charged 10 of those who registered with fraud, after a local resident reviewed the voter rolls and complained.

When the governor announced the first arrests by his election police office late last month, he brought with him his recently announced choice to run it, Pete Antonacci, a Tallahassee lawyer and former Broward supervisor of elections.

“This is a special day for those of you who observe elections over the years, because this is the day that we began taking fraud seriously,” Antonacci said as he and the governor stood in front of a row of green-uniformed sheriff’s deputies in a Fort Lauderdale courtroom.

Four of those arrested were registered to vote and sent voter ID cards from the Broward elections office when Antonacci was in charge of it.

## **Early morning arrest**

Larry S. Davis, a Miami attorney, represents one of the suspects arrested on Aug. 18. He said that several officers arrived at the Opa-locka home of his client at 6 a.m., flashing searchlights.

“There were a number of officers both in his front and backyard with semi-automatic rifles,” Davis said. “They banged on the front and back doors. He came to the front door in his underwear. He said: ‘Can I put my clothes on?’ They said, ‘No,’ and they took him to jail.”

Like the others arrested, Davis' client had served time for one of the crimes specifically excluded from reinstatement by the amendment passed by voters. The 20 charged were between the ages of 41 and 72 and had completed a voter registration form and received a voter ID card from county elections officials. Their 20 ballots were among 11.1 million cast in Florida in 2020.

Davis said his client registered to vote while at a Walmart. He told volunteers he couldn't vote because of his background, but was told that the statewide referendum to restore felons' rights had passed, the lawyer said.

“Next, he got a voter's card and thought he was good to go,” said Davis, who asked that his client not be named so he doesn't lose his job. “Now he's in this mess.”

A similar pattern played out in the arrests touted by the governor. According to the arresting documents, FDLE arrived at the homes or workplaces of the suspects, questioned them about whether they had voted, verified

their signatures on voter registration cards and, according to several individuals, did not tell them why they were under investigation. Then, on the day of the governor's announcement, sheriff's deputies arrived for the arrests.

David Weinstein, a Miami criminal defense attorney and former state and federal prosecutor, said a better approach would have been to give suspects a notice to appear and allow them to come in voluntarily.

“It sounds like they would lead them down the golden path and then they get an admission and a confession, and they get them to acknowledge that all of that is true and they met every element of the crime and they do not afford them an opportunity to self-surrender ... but rather they show up at their door at zero-dark-30 because they've gone to a judge and obtained an arrest warrant and take them into custody,” he said.

“That is in fact how law enforcement would like to do it,” he said. “That is not the way the system is supposed to operate.”

J.C. Planas, a Miami elections lawyer and former state prosecutor, said he had seen no evidence that the voters knew they were breaking the law and he described the cases as “almost like entrapment.”

“If you’re the state and you’re going to write rules saying these folks cannot register, and then you register them and mail them a voter card, the state has given up its right to prosecute,” he said. “I would not doubt that very quietly after the November election, these cases are dropped ... because they’re not going to be able to prove them in court.”

Planas added: “The prosecutors have a turd of a case.”

## **‘Nothing to hide’**

Robert Simpson, who was released from prison two decades ago, said he felt “blessed” after registering to vote at Anquan Boldin Stadium, the high school football field in Pahokee, in 2019.



“Anytime you can get some of your rights back, that feels good,” said Simpson, 64, who lost his voting rights when he was convicted of second-degree murder in 1992.

Simpson said volunteers at the voter drive filled out a registration form for him. No one told him he might be among those not eligible to vote.

After he got his voter card in the mail, he cast the first ballot of his life at the Belle Glade public library in the 2020 elections. He became a reliable voter, casting ballots in two subsequent special elections.

That was that — until Aug. 10, when a special agent with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement showed up at Simpson’s small Pahokee home, nestled between fields of sugarcane.

The agent wanted to ask him about voting. Simpson said he didn’t know why.

“I got nothing to hide,” said Simpson, who didn’t graduate from high school but earned a GED in 1975. “I told him that I voted. I showed him all the paperwork.”

The agent never acknowledged he was investigating Simpson for a crime, but did say he might have to “be in touch again” later on, Simpson said.

Eight days later, hours before the governor’s scheduled news conference, deputies with the Palm Beach Sheriff’s Office pulled Simpson over as he drove the van for the air-conditioning business where he works as a helper. The deputies told him he was being arrested for election fraud and took him to jail.

“It felt terrible going back in there, I didn’t do nothing,” he said last week. He didn’t even understand why he’d been arrested until after he paid his \$200 bond and saw a news story naming him.

Days later, Simpson said a new voter registration form showed up in his mail. He tore it up and threw it out.

He has a September court date. That's just before the sugarcane burning season, when his home is sometimes coated in dust and foul-smelling smoke from the fields.

Simpson said he never would have voted had he known he was breaking the law.

“Out of all the things in the world, voting?” he said. “I ain't getting nothing for myself for voting.”



Miami Herald

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# ‘Money talks’: DeSantis goes after small-scale voter crimes, is silent on FPL and Matrix

Mary Ellen Klas and Nicholas Nehamas, Miami Herald - Yesterday 9:54 AM



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**S**OUTH BAY, Fla. — Leo Grant Jr. couldn’t stomach the bologna sandwich that guards offered him at a Palm Beach County jail on the morning of Aug. 18.



President and Chief Executive Officer of Florida Power & Light Eric Silagy speaks to the media after FPL imploded its last Florida based coal-fired power plant in Indiantown, Florida on Wednesday, June 16, 2021.

© Matias J. Ochner/Miami Herald/TNS

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in 18 years.”

But at a campaign-style event later that day, Gov. Ron DeSantis denounced Grant and 19 other Floridians who had registered to vote and then cast ballots despite previous convictions for murder or felony sexual offenses that made them ineligible. “They’re going to pay the price,” said DeSantis, who left Florida the next day for a fundraising trip to Pennsylvania and Ohio, two swing states critical to his expected presidential run in 2024, where he again touted the arrests.

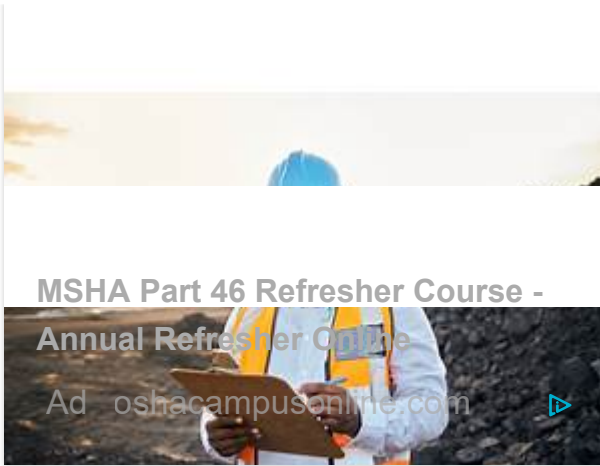


Leo Grant Jr., a South Bay resident charged with voter fraud, flips through his photo album filled with his children, a boy who is six and twin boys who are 14, on Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2022, in South Bay, Florida. Grant got out of prison in 2004 for a felony and has turned his life around. Now, 18 years later, he was arrested for voter fraud after filing to vote with the state and...

© Alie Skowronski/Miami Herald/TNS

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The charges mark what DeSantis called “the opening salvo” of his new Office of Elections Crimes and Security, which was set up on July 1



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“This is just the first step; there’s many more in the pipeline,” said DeSantis, standing behind a lectern that said “Election Integrity.”

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Robert Simpson, a Pahokee resident charged with voter fraud, poses outside of his home on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in Pahokee, Florida. In 2020, Simpson saw the new law that convicted felons could vote, and so he went through the process with the state to see if he was eligible. The state of Florida registered him to vote.

© Alia Skowronski/Miami Herald/TNS

Election law experts told the Miami Herald/Tampa Bay Times the payments were a potential violation of state campaign finance laws that ban the use of straw donors to shield the true source of campaign funds, as well as federal tax rules for nonprofits.

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“Powerful people rigging elections is far more dangerous than 20 people allegedly voting illegally,” Dunn said in an interview. “But power gets you privileges and exceptions that don’t apply to the rest of us. Money talks. Money is power. The people who’ve been charged with voter fraud have no power. ... DeSantis is making them into props for his reelection campaign and his bid for president.”

Dunn noted that county election offices had processed and accepted voter registration forms for Grant and the others without flagging them as ineligible, and that the state [signed off](#).

Unlike the voters who said they didn’t understand the law, FPL’s executives and political consultants were clearly aware of the need to cloak their activities, according to a trove of documents leaked to the Herald/Times and other news organizations.

The documents come from inside Matrix, an Alabama-based political consulting firm that worked for FPL until last year. They reveal an operation carefully choreographed with a consistent goal: [Take down elected officials](#) who stood in the way of FPL’s interests — without disclosing the company as the source of the funds and leaving enough distance to allow FPL, its high-level managers and its chief executive to deny involvement.



Leo Grant Jr., a South Bay resident charged with voter fraud, looks out the window in his house on Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2022, in South Bay, Florida. Grant got out of prison in 2004 for a felony and has turned his life around. Now, 18 years later, he was arrested for voter fraud after filing to vote with the state and being approved and sent a voter information card.

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Emails show Matrix officials setting up friends and family as operators of nonprofit groups and then directing the nonprofits' use as pipelines for campaign contributions.

Previous leaks to [the Orlando Sentinel](#) and [the Florida Times-Union](#) documented how Matrix, while in the employ of FPL, blew past ethical boundaries, including having a [Times-Union journalist tailed](#) by a private investigator and pumping resources into the [campaigns of "spoiler candidates"](#) geared to siphon votes from FPL's political opponents.





Robert Simpson, a Pahokee resident charged with voter fraud, holds his 2022 voter information card that he was sent in February on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in Pahokee, Florida. In 2020, Simpson saw the new law that convicted felons could vote, and so he went through the process with the state to see if he was eligible. The state of Florida registered him to vote.  
© Alie Skowronski/Miami Herald/TNS

In one case, records show that Matrix worked to support a candidate with the same last name as a Democratic incumbent, José Javier Rodríguez, in an apparent effort to sow confusion, redirect votes and help a Republican win his Miami state Senate seat.

[After reading a news story about a bill](#) sponsored by Rodríguez that threatened FPL's hold on the state solar-energy market, Eric Silagy, chairman and CEO of FPL, gave his top executives a clear order: "I want you to make his life a living hell....seriously," he wrote in a Jan. 7, 2019, email.



The house of Leo Grant Jr., a South Bay resident charged with voter fraud, sits next to the train tracks on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in South Bay, Florida. Grant got out of prison in 2004 for a felony and has turned his life around. Now, 18 years later, he was arrested for voter fraud after filing to vote with the state and being approved and sent a voter information card.

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The executives immediately forwarded the message to Matrix's CEO, according to the documents leaked to the Herald/Times and other news organizations. The next year, Matrix directed the transfer of \$550,000 that in part paid for mailers backing the unknown challenger, Alexis Pedro Rodriguez, an auto parts dealer with no party affiliation. Despite not actively campaigning in the 2020 contest, Alexis Pedro Rodriguez received 6,300 votes. José Javier Rodríguez lost to the Republican in the race by 32.



Jose Javier Rodriguez speaks during a press conference at Morningside Park in Miami, Florida on Monday, Aug. 17, 2020.  
© Matias J. Ochner/Miami Herald/TNS

Alexis Pedro Rodriguez was one of three alleged “ghost candidates” in the 2020 cycle whose campaigns were apparently designed to siphon votes from Democrats running for the Florida Senate. He has since pleaded guilty to two felony election law violations and is cooperating with prosecutors in a case brought by local authorities.

FPL has denied it had anything to do with its consultants’ efforts to secretly influence that or other races and says it follows all campaign finance laws. The power company has said documents tying it to Matrix election schemes “could easily be fabricated” and has refused to comment on them.

“Regarding our corporate political contributions, we require that they comply with all applicable laws,” said David Reuter, a spokesman for FPL.

A lawyer for Jeff Pitts, CEO of Matrix at the time of the activities in question, blamed the accusations on Matrix founder Joe Perkins.

“These accusations are false, tiresome and a continuation of his slander and libelous attacks,” the lawyer said. Perkins and Pitts, who left Matrix to form his own company that then took FPL’s business from Matrix, were engaged in a bitter legal battle that was finally settled last week.

Saurav Ghosh, director of federal campaign finance reform at the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center in Washington, D.C., said that under the state and federal ban on straw donors, individuals and corporations are prohibited from making political donations with the explicit intention of hiding themselves as the true source.



The home of Robert Simpson, a Pahokee resident charged with voter fraud, on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022, in Pahokee, Florida.  
© Alie Skowronski/Miami Herald/TNS

Matrix and FPL’s apparent intent to use “financial resources to defeat a candidate without any disclosure to the public” would potentially [violate such laws](#), he said. “That’s election rigging.”

Grant, who was investigated by DeSantis’ new elections office, was among several arrested felons who told the Herald/Times they did not realize they were breaking the law.

Voter registration forms ask individuals to affirm that they are not felons — or if they were convicted of felonies to affirm that their rights have been restored. All of those arrested had served their time and on the forms incorrectly indicated that their right to vote had been restored. The state says their right to cast ballots would not have been restored because their previous convictions for murder or felony sexual offenses barred them from the voter system.

They are now facing two third-degree felony counts: [submitting false voter registration information](#) and voting [as an unqualified elector](#) in the 2020 election.

The governor's political opponents say no matter what happens between now and November, the arrests of Grant and others send a chilling message to former felons, even if they are eligible to cast ballots.

"Folks are going to be scared to vote," Grant said.

## 'Selective enforcement'

DeSantis, a Republican, proposed Florida's 25-person Office of Election Crimes and Security a year ago, [as he attempted to quell calls](#) from Donald Trump supporters for the state to conduct an audit in response to baseless claims of a stolen election.

During the 2022 lawmaking session, Florida's Republican-led Legislature [created a slimmed-down version](#) of the election police force within the Florida Department of State and tasked it ["with investigating all election crimes in Florida."](#)

Daniel Smith, a University of Florida political science professor and frequent critic of the state's enforcement of elections law, said authorities "have chosen to selectively enforce the law."

Smith said the decision to go after "confused" former felons like Grant, but not powerful political consultants, whose efforts shifted thousands of votes away from FPL's political foes, is an intentional choice by the DeSantis administration.

"It's using the power of the state to selectively go after certain allegations of wrongdoing and turning a blind eye to ones where there's actually more evidence of wrongdoing," he said. "It just so happens they are targeting categories that tend to be more likely to involve minority voters and Democratic voters. The rules are not being applied uniformly across the

state.”

Of the 19 people arrested on charges of election fraud, 12 are registered Democrats, four registered with no party affiliation and three registered as Republicans, according to a Herald/Times analysis of voter registration data. (As of this past weekend, one person had been charged but not yet arrested.)

Asked if the governor prioritized arrests of individual voters over examining more organized forms of election malfeasance and campaign finance violations, DeSantis spokesman Bryan Griffin did not answer the question.

“As Gov. DeSantis has been repeatedly clear on the importance of election integrity, it should follow that it is well worthwhile to dedicate the necessary resources to accomplishing this.”

He did not respond to a request to elaborate and clarify if election integrity includes the enforcement of campaign finance laws.

## Fraud in the Villages

Hidden campaign finance schemes tied to FPL consultants at Matrix are not the only potentially illegal organized efforts that have not resulted in any action by the state as it vows to go after election fraud.

No charges have been filed against Republican Party canvassers who, according to a Herald/Times investigation, [switched the party affiliations of more than 100 elderly](#) Miami-Dade residents to Republican without their consent.

And a state Ethics Commission recommendation in October that the governor impose a \$20,000 fine against Alexis Pedro Rodriguez — the Matrix-backed “spoiler” in the Miami state Senate race — still awaits action by Gov. DeSantis 11 months later.

Meanwhile, a series of arrests this past year in the conservative retirement community of The Villages involved local residents who voted twice in 2020 — once in Florida and again in a different state. The case was handled by the local state attorney before the state formed the Office of Election Crimes, which is currently relying on agents detached from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to do investigations.

The three people arrested — all between the ages of 63 and 71, all registered Republicans — admitted to the crime.

Prosecutors offered them plea deals that will leave them with clean records — and presumably the right to vote. They must first perform 50 hours of community service and get a grade of C or better in an adult civics class, according to court records. A [fourth Villages resident](#) was arrested in January on similar charges.

Grant and others arrested on the day of DeSantis' news conference have few resources and fear they won't get off so easily.

"I ain't got no damn money for a lawyer," said Grant, who is disabled and has diabetes and a pacemaker.

Records show he had stayed out of prison since 2004, when he finished a five-year stint for lewd assault. He teared up last week thinking about what his return to incarceration might do to his three sons — twins aged 14 and a 6-year-old.

Grant, who earned his GED in 2010, said he received a voter registration form in the mail unsolicited in 2020. He said he had no idea he was barred from voting and that he read the form over quickly before filling it out.

He then had his application approved, received a voter registration card back in the mail, and was able to vote in the 2020 election.

"They sent the voter registration card to me. That was their error and their mistake," said Grant, referring to the government. "It's like a set-up. They made the mistake, but they are going to punish me."

## Who's at fault?

Mixed messaging has contributed to the confusion, arrests and convictions over voting in Florida.

In 2018, Florida voters amended the state constitution to end Florida's lifetime ban on voting for felons — with 64% casting ballots in favor of the ballot initiative. The measure specifically excluded those who had been convicted of murder, sexual assault and criminal sexual behavior.

The Legislature responded by requiring that felons who completed their sentences first pay all fees owed in relation to their crimes. The formerly incarcerated soon learned that there is

no centralized location where they could learn what, if anything, they owed.

In a 2020 interview with the Herald/Times and ProPublica, then-Secretary of State Laurel Lee, a DeSantis appointee, said [under state law](#) it was [her office's responsibility to screen felons wishing to vote](#) and to inform county supervisors which individuals were ineligible.

At the time Grant and the other 19 people filled out their registration applications, [the state backlog to determine eligibility of felons was enormous](#). Until that backlog could be cleared, former felons should be considered “eligible voters,” Lee said in the Oct. 5, 2020, interview.

At a news conference, DeSantis contradicted that view, saying the responsibility lies with county elections officials. Lee is no longer the secretary of state, having been replaced in May by Cord Byrd, a former Republican state lawmaker.

Sometimes government agencies have worked at cross-purposes. In July 2020, the Alachua County Supervisor of Elections conducted a [series of voter registration drives in the county jail](#) to encourage felons who had completed their terms to register. Two years later, Alachua prosecutors [charged 10 of those who registered with fraud](#), after a local resident reviewed the voter rolls and complained.

When the governor announced the first arrests by his election police office late last month, he brought with him his recently announced choice to run it, Pete Antonacci, a Tallahassee lawyer and former Broward Supervisor of Elections.

“This is a special day for those of you who observe elections over the years, because this is the day that we [began taking fraud seriously](#),” Antonacci said as he and the governor stood in front of a row of green-uniformed sheriff’s deputies in a Fort Lauderdale courtroom.

Four of those arrested were registered to vote and sent voter ID cards from the Broward elections office when Antonacci was in charge of it.

## Early morning arrest

Larry S. Davis, a Miami attorney, represents one of the suspects arrested on Aug. 18. He said that several officers arrived at the Opa-locka home of his client at 6 a.m., flashing searchlights.

“There were a number of officers both in his front and back yard with semi-automatic rifles,” Davis said. “They banged on the front and back doors. He came to the front door in his underwear. He said: ‘Can I put my clothes on?’ They said, ‘No,’ and they took him to jail.”



Like the others arrested, Davis' client had served time for one of the crimes specifically excluded from reinstatement by the amendment passed by voters. The 20 charged were between the ages of 41 and 72 and had completed a voter registration form and received a voter ID card from county elections officials. Their 20 ballots were among 11.1 million cast in Florida in 2020.

Davis said his client registered to vote while at a Walmart. He told volunteers he couldn't vote because of his background, but was told that the statewide referendum to restore felons' rights had passed, the lawyer said.

"Next, he got a voter's card and thought he was good to go," said Davis, who asked that his client not be named so he doesn't lose his job. "Now he's in this mess."

A similar pattern played out in the arrests touted by the governor. According to the arresting documents, FDLE arrived at the homes or workplaces of the suspects, questioned them about whether they had voted, verified their signatures on voter registration cards, and, according to several individuals, did not tell them why they were under investigation. Then, on the day of the governor's announcement, sheriff's deputies arrived for the arrests.

David Weinstein, a Miami criminal defense attorney and former state and federal prosecutor, said a better approach would have been to give suspects a notice to appear and allow them to come in voluntarily.

"It sounds like they would lead them down the golden path and then they get an admission and a confession, and they get them to acknowledge that all of that is true and they met every element of the crime and they do not afford them an opportunity to self surrender ... but rather they show up at their door at zero-dark-30 because they've gone to a judge and obtained an arrest warrant and take them into custody," he said.

"That is in fact how law enforcement would like to do it," he said. "That is not the way the system is supposed to operate."

J.C. Planas, a Miami elections lawyer and former state prosecutor, said he had seen [no evidence](#) that the voters knew they were breaking the law and he described the cases as "almost like entrapment."

"If you're the state and you're going to write rules saying these folks cannot register, and then you register them and mail them a voter card, the state has given up its right to prosecute," he said. "I would not doubt that very quietly after the November election, these cases are dropped because they're not going to be able to prove them in court."

cases are dropped ... because they're not going to be able to prove them in court.

Planas added: "The prosecutors have a turd of a case."

## 'Nothing to hide'

Robert Simpson, who was released from prison two decades ago, said he felt "blessed" after registering to vote at Anquan Boldin Stadium, the high school football field in Pahokee, in 2019.

"Anytime you can get some of your rights back, that feels good," said Simpson, 64, who lost his voting rights when he was convicted of second-degree murder in 1992.

Simpson said volunteers at the voter drive filled out a registration form for him. No one told him he might be among those not eligible to vote.

After he got his voter card in the mail, he cast the first ballot of his life at the Belle Glade public library in the 2020 elections. He became a reliable voter, casting ballots in two subsequent special elections.

That was that — until Aug. 10, when a special agent with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement showed up at Simpson's small Pahokee home, nestled between fields of sugarcane.

The agent wanted to ask him about voting. Simpson said he didn't know why.

"I got nothing to hide," said Simpson, who didn't graduate from high school but earned a GED in 1975. "I told him that I voted. I showed him all the paperwork."

The agent never acknowledged he was investigating Simpson for a crime, but did say he might have to "be in touch again" later on, Simpson said.

Eight days later, hours before the governor's scheduled news conference, deputies with the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office pulled Simpson over as he drove the van for the air conditioning business where he works as a helper. The deputies told him he was being arrested for election fraud and took him to jail.

"It felt terrible going back in there, I didn't do nothing," he said last week. He didn't even understand why he'd been arrested until after he paid his \$200 bond and saw a news story naming him.

Days later, Simpson said a new voter registration form showed up in his mail. He tore it up and threw it out.

He has a September court date. That's just before the sugarcane burning season, when his home is sometimes coated in dust and foul-smelling smoke from the fields.

Simpson said he never would have voted had he known he was breaking the law.

"Out of all the things in the world, voting?" he said. "I ain't getting nothing for myself for voting."