

NSF Staff
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TALLAHASSEE --- Restoring the voting rights of felons has long been a flash point in Florida politics.

Democrats want to quickly restore the rights of felons who have served their sentences and are trying to re-establish themselves in society. But many Republicans, including Gov. Rick Scott and Attorney General Pam Bondi, oppose quick restoration, arguing that felons should first have to prove they won't return to

lives of crime.

While the debate has raged for years, Florida is in a pivotal period.

A federal appeals court Wednesday will hear arguments in a challenge to the constitutionality of Florida's lengthy rights-restoration process. U.S. District Judge Mark Walker this year ruled that the process is unconstitutional, writing, in part, that it "strips the right to vote from every man and woman who commits a felony" and leaves ex-felons at the mercy of the whims of Scott and Cabinet members, who act as the state clemency board.

But the state appealed Walker's ruling to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, contending that the governor and Cabinet have the authority to determine rights-restoration procedures. The appeals court gave the state a preliminary victory by blocking a Walker order that would have required officials to come up with a new restoration process by an April 26 deadline.

Regardless of the outcome of the legal fight, the rights-restoration issue will continue at least until the November election.

A political committee known as Floridians for a Fair Democracy has put a proposed constitutional amendment on the November ballot that would require automatic restoration of rights for most felons after they have completed terms of their sentences. The proposal would not apply to felons convicted of murder or sexual offenses.