

DEMOCRACY AT STAKE

Protecting Fair and Impartial Courts For Florida

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NEWS

COURT ADVOCATES SEEKING STRONGER PROTECTIONS FOR FAIRNESS, IMPARTIALITY OF FLORIDA COURTS

Democracy at Stake, Floridians for Fair & Impartial Courts merger launches search for long-term solutions

TALLAHASSEE – Fair courts advocates who have rallied to defeat two separate but equally dangerous attempts to politicize Florida courts are not standing down. Leaders of Democracy at Stake (DAS) and Floridians for Fair & Impartial Courts (FFIC) on (day) announced the merger of the two non-profit, non-partisan organizations and their commitment to staying ahead of the ongoing threats to the fairness and impartiality of the courts.

Floridians for Fair & Impartial Courts, led by former Supreme Court Justice Raoul Cantero, was created in 2011 to defend the judicial branch from legislative initiatives that threatened to upset the balance of power. Democracy at Stake was organized after partisan forces announced plans to campaign for removal of the three Supreme Court Justices on the ballot for retention in 2012. The merger brings together leadership of both organizations under the Democracy at Stake banner. Former state senator Alex Villalobos will continue to serve as president of Democracy at Stake, with Cantero serving as vice president.

“As we began to assess lessons learned from the merit races and looked at similar initiatives that are continuing to advance against courts across the country, we realized the battle is far from over,” Villalobos said. “For years our merit selection and retention system served as an effective barrier between the political branches and the courts. The firewall has clearly been breached, and we have to figure out how to repair the damage.”

The strategies deployed in Florida to defend against partisan tactics are being held up as a model in states where courts are facing similar attacks. According to Villalobos, the difference between Florida and Iowa where partisan antagonists prevailed – was preparation.

“In many ways we were fortunate in that they didn’t strike here first. We saw what was happening, and were able to marshal resources to pre-empt the attack,” Villalobos said. “When moneyed interests from out of state were lining up to tip the scales of justice in their favor, our choice was to engage or surrender.”

Going forward, Democracy at Stake will be focused on developing and promoting long-term policy solutions and reform to keep the courts free from political influence. In addition to carefully monitoring all policy proposals related to the courts and investigating potential impacts, a bi-partisan task force will launch a series of workshops early next year to review all aspects of the merit selection and retention process, explore alternative approaches, and ultimately recommend reforms.

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Democracy at Stake is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization committed to maintaining the critical balance of power between Florida’s three co-equal branches of government. Our broad-based coalition is working to preserve a fair, impartial and non-political court system by identifying threats, developing solutions and promoting reforms to keep courts free from political influence.