

**The Florida Senate**  
**BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

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Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Rules

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BILL: SB 342

INTRODUCER: Senator Lee

SUBJECT: Public Records/Voters and Voter Registration

DATE: April 16, 2019

REVISED: \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Mitchell</u>	<u>Roberts</u>	<u>EE</u>	<b>Favorable</b>
2.	<u>Hackett</u>	<u>McVaney</u>	<u>GO</u>	<b>Favorable</b>
3.	<u>Mitchell</u>	<u>Phelps</u>	<u>RC</u>	<b>Pre-meeting</b>

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**I. Summary:**

SB 342 amends s. 97.0585(1), F.S., which contains several public records exemptions for voter registration information.

Current law holds confidential and exempt all declinations to register to vote, information relating to the location a person registered to vote, and the person's social security number, driver's license number, and Florida identification number. The bill continues the confidential and exempt status of this information if the information was obtained for the purpose of voter registration.

The bill makes all information concerning 16- and 17-year-olds who preregister to vote confidential and exempt from public inspection and copying requirements until they reach the age of 18. The bill provides for repeal of the exemption on October 2, 2024, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature. It also provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution.

Because the bill creates a new public records exemption, it requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature for final passage.

This bill takes effect July 1, 2019.

## II. Present Situation:

### Public Records Law

The State Constitution provides that the public has the right to inspect or copy records made or received in connection with official governmental business.<sup>1</sup> This applies to the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, including all three branches of state government, local governmental entities, and any person acting on behalf of the government.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the State Constitution, the Florida Statutes provide that the public may access legislative and executive branch records.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 119, F.S., constitutes the main body of public records laws, and is known as the Public Records Act.<sup>4</sup> The Public Records Act states that it is the policy of this state that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person and that providing access to public records is a duty of each agency.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Public Records Act, a public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.<sup>6</sup> The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted public records as being “any material prepared in connection with official agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate or formalize knowledge of some type.”<sup>7</sup> A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.<sup>8</sup>

The Legislature may create an exemption to public records requirements.<sup>9</sup> An exemption must pass by a two-thirds vote of the House and the Senate.<sup>10</sup> In addition, an exemption must explicitly lay out the public necessity justifying the exemption, and the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the exemption.<sup>11</sup> A statutory

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<sup>1</sup> FLA. CONST., Art. I, s. 24(a).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> The Public Records Act does not apply to legislative or judicial records. *Locke v. Hawkes*, 595 So. 2d 32 (Fla. 1992). Also, see *Times Pub. Co. v. Ake*, 660 So. 2d 255 (Fla. 1995). The Legislature’s records are public pursuant to s. 11.0431, F.S. Public records exemptions for the Legislatures are primarily located in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S.

<sup>4</sup> Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

<sup>5</sup> Section 119.01(1), F.S.

<sup>6</sup> Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public record” as “all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, data processing software, or other material, regardless of the physical form, characteristics, or means of transmission, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency.” Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines “agency” as “any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.”

<sup>7</sup> *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Assoc. Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

<sup>9</sup> FLA. CONST., Art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

exemption which does not meet these criteria may be unconstitutional and may not be judicially saved.<sup>12</sup>

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “confidential and exempt” or “exempt.”<sup>13</sup> Records designated as “confidential and exempt” may be released by the records custodian only under the circumstances defined by the Legislature. Records designated as “exempt” may be released at the discretion of the records custodian.<sup>14</sup>

### **Open Government Sunset Review Act**

In addition to the constitutional requirements relating to the enactment of a public records exemption, the Legislature may subject the new or broadened exemption to the Open Government Sunset Review Act (OGSRA).

The OGSRA prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public records.<sup>15</sup> The OGSRA provides that an exemption automatically repeals on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment. In order to save an exemption from repeal, the Legislature must reenact the exemption.<sup>16</sup> In practice, many exemptions are continued by repealing the sunset date rather than reenacting the exemption.

If the Legislature expands an exemption, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.<sup>17</sup> If the exemption is reenacted without substantive changes or if the exemption is narrowed, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are not required. If the Legislature allows an exemption to sunset, the previously exempt records will remain exempt unless otherwise provided for by law.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. New-Journal Corp.*, 724 So.2d 567 (Fla. 1999). In *Halifax Hospital*, the Florida Supreme Court found that a public meetings exemption was unconstitutional because the statement of public necessity did not define important terms and did not justify the breadth of the exemption. *Id.* at 570. The Florida Supreme Court also declined to narrow the exemption in order to save it. *Id.* In *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004), the court found that the intent of a statute was to create a public records exemption. The *Baker County Press* court found that since the law did not contain a public necessity statement, it was unconstitutional. *Id.* at 196.

<sup>13</sup> If the Legislature designates a record as confidential, such record may not be released to anyone other than the persons or entities specifically designated in the statutory exemption. *WFTV, Inc. v. The School Board of Seminole*, 874 So.2d 48 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

<sup>14</sup> A record classified as exempt from public disclosure may be disclosed under certain circumstances. *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So.2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Section 119.15, F.S. According to s. 119.15(4)(b), F.S., a substantially amended exemption is one that is expanded to include more information or to include meetings. The OGSRA does not apply to an exemption that is required by federal law or that applies solely to the Legislature or the State Court System pursuant to s. 119.15(2), F.S. The OGSRA process is currently being followed; however, the Legislature is not required to continue to do so. The Florida Supreme Court has found that one legislature cannot bind a future legislature. *Scott v. Williams*, 107 So. 3d 379 (Fla. 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Section 119.15(3), F.S.

<sup>17</sup> FLA. CONST., Art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>18</sup> Section 119.15(7), F.S.

## Public Record Exemption for Voter Registration Information

Current law provides a public record exemption for certain information held by an agency<sup>19</sup> for purposes of voter registration.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the following information is confidential and exempt from public record requirements:

- All declinations to register to vote made pursuant to ss. 97.057 and 97.058, F.S.
- Information relating to the place where a person registered to vote or where a person updated a voter registration.
- The social security number, driver's license number, and Florida identification number of a voter registration applicant or voter.

In addition, the signature of a voter registration applicant or a voter is exempt from copying requirements.<sup>21</sup>

## Voter Pre-Registration for Minors

An individual may register to vote in accordance with Florida law if he or she is at least 18 years old, a United States citizen, a legal resident of Florida, and a legal resident of the county in which he or she seeks to register.<sup>22</sup> However, individuals who are otherwise qualified to register to vote but are not yet 18 may pre-register to vote on or after the individual's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>23</sup>

## Publication of Voter Information

Since 1998 when the State first began compiling all 67 counties' "official" voter registration lists into a unified statewide voter registration database,<sup>24</sup> anyone has been able to request an electronic copy of every Florida voters' non-exempt information.<sup>25</sup> The rise of the Internet has enabled publication of this information for literally the entire world to see at little to no cost, thereby giving rise to serious personal privacy issues.

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<sup>19</sup> Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines "agency" to mean "any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency."

<sup>20</sup> Section 97.0585, F.S.

<sup>21</sup> Section 97.0585(2), F.S.

<sup>22</sup> Section 97.041(a)(a), F.S.

<sup>23</sup> Section 97.041(1)(b), F.S.

<sup>24</sup> Ch. 97-13, ss. 39, 56, LAWS OF FLA. (effective January 1, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> In 2001, the Legislature sought to adopt a much more restrictive public records scheme similar to the one proposed in the original bill, in connection with a then-newly-authorized statewide voter registration database. Ch. 2001-40, s. 70-72, LAWS OF FLA. (codified at s. 98.0979, F.S. (2002)). Three years later, a Leon County circuit court judge struck the statute down void ab initio on procedural grounds, finding that it was adopted in a general elections bill without the requisite statement of public necessity in violation of Art. I, s. 24 of the Florida Constitution — the effect being that the statute never existed or was never on the books. See *Cable News Network, et al. v. Florida Dep't of State*, Case No. 2004 CA 001259 (2nd Jud. Cir., July 1, 2004) (Final Declaratory Summary Judgment). The Legislature repealed the statute the following year. See, Ch. 2005-278, s. 55, LAWS OF FLA.; Ch. 2005-277, s. 77, LAWS OF FLA.

At least one web site<sup>26</sup> that contains commercial or sponsored links, provides extensive details about every registered and pre-registered voter in the State — including the voter’s name, date of birth, residence address, mailing address, voter ID number, when the person registered to vote, what political party the person is affiliated with, the voter’s telephone number, e-mail address, race, precinct number, as well as other information about district races in which the person is eligible to vote. This information can be accessed by voter’s name, birth date, or address.

### **III. Effect of Proposed Changes:**

The bill amends s. 97.0585(1), F.S., relating to several public records exemptions for voter registration information.

Primarily, the bill makes confidential and exempt from public inspection and copying requirements all information concerning 16- and 17-year-olds who have preregistered to vote until they reach the age of 18.

This exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and stands repealed on October 2, 2024, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature.

The bill also places a qualification on the current and new exemptions from public records disclosure requirements that the information, to be confidential and exempt, must have been obtained for the purpose of voter registration.

The bill also provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution. The public necessity statement identifies that minors are more vulnerable members of society, and the widespread release of their information may be used to solicit, harass, stalk, or intimidate them. It states that the release of their information may reduce the likelihood of preregistration, which hinders the administration of a program designed to encourage greater participation in the democratic process.

This bill will take effect July 1, 2019.

### **IV. Constitutional Issues:**

#### **A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:**

Not applicable. The mandate restrictions do not apply because the bill does not require counties and municipalities to spend funds, reduce counties’ or municipalities’ ability to raise revenue, or reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties and municipalities.

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://flvoters.com/> (last visited on March 19, 2019).

**B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:*****Vote Requirement***

Section 24(c) of Article I of the State Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for passage of a newly created or expanded public-records or public-meetings exemption. Therefore, this bill requires a two-thirds vote for passage.

***Public Necessity Statement***

Article I, s. 24(c), of the State Constitution requires a bill that creates or expands an exemption to the public records requirements to state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption. Section 2 of the bill contains a statement of public necessity for the exemptions.

This public necessity statement provides that disclosure of information held by an agency concerning preregistered voter registration applicants who are 16 or 17 years of age could be misused to solicit, harass, stalk, or intimidate such individuals, and without such protection, a minor may be less likely to take advantage of preregistering to vote.

***Breadth of Exemption***

Section 24(c) of Article I of the State Constitution requires a public record or public meeting exemption to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law.

SB 342 expands the public record exemption to include all information concerning preregistered voter registration applicants who are 16 or 17 years of age which is held by an agency and obtained for the purpose of voter registration.

Generally, the exemption does not appear to be in conflict with the constitutional requirement that the exemption be no broader than necessary to accomplish its purpose.

**C. Trust Funds Restrictions:**

None.

**D. State Tax or Fee Increases:**

None.

**E. Other Constitutional Issues:**

None identified.

**V. Fiscal Impact Statement:****A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

**B. Private Sector Impact:**

The bill may adversely impact commercial web sites and businesses that profit from sharing Florida voter registration data. However, since the bill only protects the information of minors before they become age-eligible to vote, the fiscal impact, if any, is unclear. Additionally, the private sector will be subject to the cost, to the extent imposed, associated with the agency making redactions in response to public records request.

**C. Government Sector Impact:**

The bill may have a fiscal impact on agencies relating to the training and redaction of the confidential and exempt information. However, the costs are likely minimal.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends section 97.0585 of the Florida Statutes.

**IX. Additional Information:****A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

**B. Amendments:**

None.