



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 2, 2011

Florida Bill Would Repeal Ban on Funding for Religious Groups

A ban on public funding for religious organizations, written into Florida's constitution in the 1880s, would be repealed under a bill now before the state's legislature. The Associated Press reported that the bill, HJR 1471, won approval in the state House on April 27, but its companion measure, SB 1218, was stalled in the state Senate.



Sponsors of the bill, which had the unanimous support of Republican representatives along with three House Democrats, said the funding ban dates back to the 19th century and the anti-Catholic prejudice that predominated in the state at the time. "This bill is simply about righting a wrong that happened in our state 126 years ago," indicated the bill's chief House sponsor, Representative Scott Plakon. "At the time Protestants thought they could get away with using our state constitution to treat Catholics differently. It was sinful what we did."

Opponents of the bill argue that dropping the ban could result in public funding for narrow-minded and "bigoted" religious groups. One legislator, Democratic Representative James Waldman, objected to a provision in the bill stipulating that individuals couldn't be barred from participating in public programs because they receive benefits from religious groups that receive state funds. The AP quoted Waldman as warning that the provision could allow "organizations that espouse anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, anti-whatever ... messages to be funded by the state of Florida."

Florida is one of a majority of states whose constitutions include a measure, commonly known as the "Blaine amendment," which bans state funds from going to religious institutions. The amendment is named for 19th century Maine Republican James Blaine, who served in both the U.S. Senate and the House, and who lost the 1884 presidential election to Grover Cleveland, the Democrat candidate. Blaine pushed for a similar amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which passed in the House but failed in the Senate.

Republicans in Florida's legislature warned that the funding ban could be used to eliminate public moneys now going to religious hospitals and schools. "Florida has voucher programs that allow students to attend religious and other private schools with public dollars if they have disabilities or come from low-income families," reported the AP, but an appeals court "ruled another program for students from



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failing public schools violated the ban,” with the Florida Supreme Court striking down the same program on other constitutional grounds.

Should both houses of Florida’s legislature approve the measure, it will be put before Florida’s voters in the next general election for their approval to strip the ban from the state’s constitution.

Photo: Florida state capitol, Tallahassee



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