

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Democratic Party Accuses Senators of Protecting Their Seats at Expense of Virgin Islanders After Bill 36-0134 Is Tabled by One Vote

The V.I. Democratic Party said the 8–7 vote to table Bill 36-0134 halted legislation intended to remove a six-month unpaid leave requirement for government employees seeking office, arguing the move preserved incumbency and limited fair participation.

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From left to right, top row: Alma Francis Heyliger, Angel Bolques Jr., Kurt Vialet, and Marvin Blyden. Bottom row: Carla Joseph, Ray Fonseca, Kenneth Gittens, and Hubert Lorenzo Frederick. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands on Friday sharply criticized the tabling of Bill No. 36-0134, describing the move as a deliberate act of political obstruction that halted legislation aimed at removing a long-standing barrier preventing government employees from seeking elected office.

In a press release issued by the party's Territorial Committee, the Democratic Party said the bill, sponsored by Senator Marise James and advanced through the Rules and Judiciary Committee after months of public discussion, was intentionally stalled despite having already cleared a key legislative hurdle. The measure addressed a mandate requiring government employees to forfeit their livelihoods for six months in order to run for office, a provision the party characterized as antiquated and punitive.

According to the Democratic Party, government employees make up the largest segment of the Virgin Islands electorate, and the six-month unpaid requirement has historically discouraged qualified individuals from pursuing public service while protecting incumbency. The party emphasized that the tabling of the bill was not a procedural delay, but a conscious decision taken after extensive vetting and debate.

"After principled and deliberate discussion, the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands took an unequivocal stand in support of this legislation," said Carol M. Burke, Virgin Islands State Chairperson. "We supported this bill because it removed a systemic barrier that has long protected incumbency and discouraged qualified Virgin Islanders from entering public service."

Burke, a former senator and longtime Democratic Party official, rejected efforts to portray the issue as partisan in nature. "This legislation was never about party advantage. It was about dismantling a structural obstacle designed to preserve political power for those already in office. The bill was fully vetted, publicly debated, and clearly understood by all. To halt it at this stage was an act of political obstruction driven by self-interest, not a concern for good governance or the common good of its people they serve."

The bill's progress was halted after Senator Angel L. Bolques Jr., a Democrat, filed a motion to hold the measure, effectively stopping it from advancing. The motion passed by the narrowest possible margin, 8–7. All but one of the senators who voted to table the bill — Alma Francis Heyliger — are members of the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands, highlighting internal divisions within the party. Voting in favor were Senators Marvin A. Blyden, Bolques, Francis Heyliger, Hubert Lorenzo Frederick, Kenneth L. Gittens, Carla Joseph, Kurt Violet, and Ray Fonseca. Senator Fonseca initially indicated he would not vote but ultimately cast the tie-breaking vote that allowed the bill to be tabled.

Voting against the motion were Senators Dwayne DeGraff, Novelle E. Francis Jr., Marise James, Franklin Johnson, Clifford Joseph, Avery Lewis, and Senate President Milton Potter.

"The only thing that prevented this bill from moving forward was the deliberate choice by some senators to protect their own political security by financially and structurally

blocking qualified candidates from participating on equal footing with sitting elected officials,” Burke said. “We also condemn attempts to gaslight the public through verbal manipulation and intentional confusion of a straightforward issue.”

The Democratic Party stated that it views the decision as a direct threat to democratic participation, arguing that when elected officials obstruct reforms that expand access to public service, they undermine public trust and weaken democratic institutions. The party stressed that inclusion strengthens democracy, while restrictions erode it.