

Voting Rights Are Under Attack

August 6, 2015 marked 50 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. To commemorate this historic event, President Barak Obama and tens of thousands of supporters took to the streets of Selma, Alabama in honor of “Bloody Sunday,” the historic march that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act that forever changed history. Unfortunately, during a time that should have been focused solely on celebration and reflection, President Obama and many other leaders were once again marching in Selma in an attempt to draw attention to the new threats to voting rights.

Since 2008 voting rights have been under attack by lawmakers who are slowly eroding the essential law that has helped so many American citizens, the Voting Rights Act (VRA). Legislatures in states across the nation have passed suppressive voting laws that have made it more difficult for Americans, particularly African Americans, Latinos, the elderly, students, and people with disabilities, to exercise their fundamental right to cast a ballot. In District 3 alone, we have seen cuts to early voting, stricter voter ID laws and the closure of most of the Department of Motor Vehicle locations in the state of Alabama. None of these changes would be possible if not for the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Shelby County v. Holder* case in 2013. The Supreme Court’s ruling struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act. Section 4 determines which states must seek approval from the federal government to change voting laws. By striking down Section 4, the preclearance protections of Section 5 were also lost. Section 5 prevented certain states from implementing any change to voting practices or procedures until the jurisdiction proves to the federal government that the effect of the change will not deny or abridge the voting rights of any race or color.

Following this unfair and unjust decision, Southern states quickly became very aggressive in curbing voting rights. The closure of 31 DMV offices in 2015 and even more in early 2016 will make it difficult, and for many residents nearly impossible, to comply with the new voter ID requirements in Alabama. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the closures occurred in predominately African American districts.

A month after the Shelby County decision, North Carolina passed the most sweeping voting restrictions in the country. State legislators cut early voting, ended same day registration, changed voter ID guidelines, and curtailed virtually every reform that made it easier to vote.

In Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina new voter ID laws have turned away longtime voters who exercised their right to vote for nearly 50 years by requiring a photo ID for the first time in 2014. Georgia also made changes to their voting laws by drastically reducing the number of early voting days from 45 to 21; and in Augusta, district lines were re-drawn to make it harder for minority candidates to be elected.

In Florida, Governor Rick Scott (R) reduced the early voting period in 2011. By doing so he caused voters to stand in line nearly 8 hours to vote in the 2012 Presidential election. He also reversed a prior executive action that made it easier to restore voting rights to people with past criminal convictions. In effect, Florida now permanently disenfranchises most citizens with past felony convictions.

Election laws are passed by legislators who stand to benefit from them; therefore the GOP manipulating with the very process from which they draw their authority should make us all pause. Their tactics to gut the VRA places us in the most difficult and unequal position we've been in since 1965. Due to the eradication of Section 4 we are no longer moving forward in our fight for equality but instead we are once again fighting for the same rights our historic brothers and sisters fought so hard to achieve in 1965. We have forgotten the purpose of the VRA and because of this we have also taken it for granted. The VRA was passed to give citizens the right to vote in Southern states that have a long history of racially biased and frequently violent voter suppression. It should be disheartening to all of us to see that the progress we made so many years ago is now being attacked in an effort to make the electorate older, whiter and more conservative. The changes in our foundational laws disproportionately affect minority and younger voters who were at the core of the 2008 and 2012 Presidential elections when voters were more diverse and progressive. This attack is unconscionable and we cannot just sit back and let it happen.

In order to find a solution to this ongoing issue we need to become more involved in our communities. We need to educate our young voters and we need to be proactive in leading voting registration drives. Let your state leaders know that you do not support their voter suppression tactics by speaking out against their deliberate efforts to disenfranchise minority voters. We must also support the Voting Rights Advancement Act which not only restores section 4 of the VRA but would also place violators under federal supervision and serve as a deterrent to other states toying with voting discrimination.

The cornerstone of this great country is the right to vote – and we must all work together to ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to do so. If we don't stand up, fight back and take back our democracy we will fail our children and our future will be hopeless. As our President, Chris Shelton stated, "This is OUR government and democracy belongs to us all."