

Background

The right to vote is fundamental to the functioning of our democracy. Over the history of the United States, that right, initially restricted to white, property-owning males, has slowly expanded thanks to judicial and legislative action. One of the most important tools to protect voting rights is the Voting Rights Act (VRA), which was drafted in part in the Religious Action Center and first passed by Congress in 1965. It and has been renewed four times, most recently in 2006, when it had the support of overwhelming and bipartisan majorities and was signed into law by President George W. Bush.

The VRA prohibits any voting policy with a discriminatory effect and banned poll taxes and literacy tests. It also focused on reducing problems in areas with a history of voting rights violations, requiring those areas to ask the federal government for “preclearance” before making changes to their voting laws. These areas were determined by a formula established in Section 4(b) of the Act.

On June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelby v. Holder* that Section 4(b) of the VRA (the formula for deciding the places that needed preclearance to change their voting laws) was unconstitutional and outdated, while leaving the rest of the VRA intact. Many states previously covered by Section 4(b) are now testing the extent to which they can legally limit citizens’ access to the ballot box.

Legislative Update

On June 24, 2015, the Voting Rights Advancement Act (VRAA) (H.R. 2867 / S. 1659) was introduced in both the House and Senate. The Voting Rights Advancement Act has received broad and strong support from the civil rights community because it responds to the unique, modern-day challenges of voting discrimination. The Voting Rights Advancement Act recognizes that changing demographics require tools that protect voters nationwide—especially voters of color, voters who rely on languages other than English, and voters with disabilities. It also requires that jurisdictions make voting changes public and transparent.

The Voting Rights Advancement Act would:

- Modernize the preclearance formula to cover states with a pattern of discrimination that puts voters at risk
- Ensure that last-minute voting changes won’t adversely affect voters
- Protect voters from the types of voting changes most likely to discriminate against people of color and language minorities
- Enhance the ability to apply preclearance review when needed
- Expand the effective federal observer program
- Improve voting rights protections for Native Americans and Alaska Natives

Reform Jewish Values

As Reform Jews and as American citizens, we believe that the right to vote is sacrosanct. We are reminded of the importance of participating in the governance of our community. Pirkei Avot states, “Do not separate yourself from the community (2:4).” In the United States, as in any democracy, voting is the most important and fundamental way that we can have a say in how our communities are run. Making voting easier and more accessible enables us to exercise this right and obligation.

Furthermore, attempts to prevent citizens from voting are unethical. The Talmud states, “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted (B’rachot 55a).” In particular, as Jews, we cannot stand idly by when laws disproportionately and negatively impact poor and minority communities. We are committed to the equal treatment of all citizens, and the equal right and ability to participate in democracy is a key component of that commitment. It is our duty to ensure that all eligible citizens are afforded the opportunity to vote and have their votes counted. We believe in the dignity of every voter and allegations of voter disenfranchisement compel us to speak out.