

Need to preserve voting rights

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In a democracy, the right to vote is a fundamental right, preservative of all rights. That's what the Supreme Court wrote in 1886, years after Congress ratified the 15th Amendment, which outlawed discrimination in voting on the basis of race and color, giving former slaves access to the franchise. But the amendment and the court's proclamation still did not secure access to the ballot for all. Women still could not vote, and most people of color still found themselves mute in our democracy. In fact, not until 1920 were women extended the ballot. But the fight to secure the right to vote did not stop there.

Fifty years ago, more than 700 volunteers went to Mississippi to work with and in black communities to make the right to vote real. At the time, less than 7% of blacks in the state were registered. Of course, this was not for lack of want. Instead, state-sanctioned voter suppression tactics, including intimidation and violence were used to keep African-Americans from registering and voting. Faced with threats to their lives, their families, their homes and their jobs, African-Americans had little choice.

But that summer, Freedom Summer, changed everything. White and black allies joined with local black communities to challenge the status quo. Three Freedom Summer workers (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner) were killed, more than 600 bombings targeted the black community and over 1,000 people were arrested during the quest to secure the most basic right of American citizenship.

The next year, civil rights advocates in Alabama intensified their efforts to register black voters. They, too, were up against extreme radicalism that sought to maintain political power by denying access to the ballot. In response, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the story does not end there.

Registration rates of people of color have increased dramatically since then, and voting in most places has become easier. Early voting including weekends, election day registration, voting by mail, provisional ballots and registration at state agencies have made our democracy more accessible to Americans. As remarkable as these advances have been, there have been retractions and backsliding in many places.

Manipulation of the voting rules for partisan political gain has made it harder for people of color, students, the elderly and people with disabilities to vote. In Wisconsin, for example, the Legislature passed a law requiring a strict, state-issued photo identification, something Latino

and black voters are less likely to have. In North Carolina, among other things, the Legislature cut back early voting including on Sundays, same-day registration and instituted a state-issued voter ID requirement. For the 70% of black voters in 2012 who used early voting in North Carolina in 2012, it will be harder to vote. As these laws were passed, groups such as [Advancement Project](#) turned to the courts to safeguard the ideals of Freedom Summer.

Unfortunately, the right to vote is in limbo in the courts, too. In Wisconsin and North Carolina, Advancement Project is appealing federal court decisions that will permit implementation of laws that make it harder to vote. In both instances, states passed these laws without a compelling reason. There was no voter impersonation that required a photo ID fix. Administrative costs of running election day registration or early voting did not bust their budgets. No, in fact, as in Pennsylvania and Indiana when they passed their photo ID laws, there was no such significant reason to hang their legislative hats. Once again, Americans, especially those who were subjected to Jim Crow's hurdles to the ballot, were feeling the brunt of the illegitimate burdens. While these laws look innocuous, the surgical precision of their impact make it look like 1964 all over again.

America has always struggled to make the promise of a just democracy real. Often "We the People" is forgotten, ignored or, even worse, subjugated, in the administration of elections. With no national standards for voting, many local and state officials and politicians are manipulating the rules for political gain. And too often, the courts rubberstamp such damaging policies.

The laws and rules stipulating who gets to vote and how, clearly matter. Our guarantee of equality requires national voting standards. Rather than a patchwork of policies, we need a consistent, unified policy to safeguard voting rights once and for all.

It's time to make voting free, fair and accessible to all Americans. We have the power to stop partisan wrangling to control the outcomes of elections. Congress should pass a constitutional amendment for a right to vote, clarifying that the right to vote is a right that must be respected by courts and politicians alike. The legacy of Freedom Summer serves as a guiding star. It offers a sobering reminder of an unfortunate history, yet compellingly moves us to strive for a day when all voices can be lifted for the betterment of us all. Let's heed the call.

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