

STATEMENT

In order for the United States to continue as one of the world's leading democracies, it must ensure all eligible citizens are able to register and cast their ballots. We should be seeking ways to encourage more voters, not inventing baseless excuses to deny voters the ability to cast their ballots.

I. Restricting Access to the Vote

No right is more fundamental than the right to vote. It is protected by more constitutional amendments - the 1st, 14th, 15th, 19th, 24th and 26th - than any other right we enjoy as Americans. Broad political participation ensures the preservation of all our other rights and freedoms. 3 State laws that impose new restrictions on voting, however, undermine our strong democracy by impeding access to the polls and reducing the number of Americans who vote and whose votes are counted.

There have been several restrictive voting bills considered and approved by states in the past several years. The most commonly advanced initiatives are laws that require voters to present photo identification when voting in person. Additionally, states have proposed or passed laws to require proof of citizenship when registering to vote; to eliminate the right to register to vote and to submit a change of address within the same state on Election Day; to shorten the time allowed for early voting; to make it more difficult for third-party organizations to conduct voter registration; and even to eliminate a mandate on poll workers to direct voters who go to the wrong precinct.

These recent changes are on top of the disfranchisement laws in 48 states that deprive an estimated 5.3 million people with criminal convictions – disproportionately African Americans and Latinos – of their political voice.

A. Photo Identification Requirements

Voter ID laws are becoming increasingly common across the country. Today, 31 states have laws requiring voters to present some form of identification to vote in federal, state and local elections, although some laws or initiatives passed in 2011 have not yet gone into effect. Some must also be pre-cleared under the Voting Rights Act prior to implementation. In 16 of those 31 States, voters must (or will soon be required to) present a photo ID – that in many states must be government-issued – in order to cast a ballot.

Voter ID laws deny the right to vote to thousands of registered voters who do not have, and, in many instances, cannot obtain the limited identification states accept for voting. Many of these Americans cannot afford to pay for the required documents needed to secure a government issued photo ID . As such, these laws impede access to the polls and are at odds with the fundamental right to vote. In total, more than 21 million Americans of voting age lack documentation that would satisfy photo ID laws, and a disproportionate number of these Americans are low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, and elderly. As many as 25% of African Americans of voting age lack government-issued photo ID, compared to only 8% of their white counterparts.⁸Eighteen percent of Americans over the age of 65 do not have government-issued photo ID.

Laws requiring photo identification to vote are a “solution” in search of a problem. There is no credible evidence that in-person impersonation voter fraud – the only type of fraud that photo IDs could prevent – is even a minor problem. Multiple studies have found that almost all cases of alleged in-person impersonation voter “fraud” are actually the result of a voter making an inadvertent mistake about their eligibility to vote, and that even these mistakes are extremely infrequent.

It is important, instead, to focus on both expanding the franchise and ending practices which actually threaten the integrity of the elections, such as improper purges of voters, voter harassment, and

distribution of false information about when and where to vote. None of these issues, however, are addressed or can be resolved with a photo ID requirement.

Furthermore, requiring voters to pay for an ID, as well as the background documents necessary to obtain an ID in order to vote, is tantamount to a poll tax. Although some states issue IDs for free, the birth certificates, passports, or other documents required to secure a government-issued ID cost money, and many Americans simply cannot afford to pay for them. In addition, obtaining a government-issued photo ID is not an easy task for all members of the electorate. Low-income individuals who lack the funds to pay for documentation, people with disabilities with limited access to transportation, and elderly

Americans who never had a birth certificate and cannot obtain alternate proof of their birth in the U.S., are among those who face significant or insurmountable obstacles to getting the photo ID needed to exercise their right to vote.¹¹ For example, because of Texas' recently passed voter ID law, an estimated 36,000 people in West Texas's District 19 are 137 miles from the nearest full service Department of Public Safety office, where those without IDs must travel to preserve their right to vote under the state's new law.

In addition, women who have changed their names due to marriage or divorce often experience difficulties with identity documentation, as did Andrea, who recently moved from Massachusetts to South Carolina and who, in the span of a month, spent more than 17 hours online and in person trying without success to get a South Carolina driver's license.

Voter ID laws send not-so-subtle messages about who is and is not encouraged to vote. As states approve laws requiring photo ID to vote, each formulates its own list of acceptable forms of documentation. Another common thread emerging from disparate state approaches is a bias against robust student electoral participation.

Henceforth, students at Wisconsin colleges and universities will not be able to vote using their student ID cards, unless those cards have issuance dates, expiration dates, and signatures.

Currently, only a handful of Wisconsin colleges and universities are issuing compliant IDs. Nor will South Carolina, Texas, or Tennessee accept student identification at the polls. Policies that limit students' electoral participation are particularly suspect, appearing on the heels of unprecedented youth turnout in the 2008 election.

Four states with new voter identification mandates, Texas, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama, are required under the Voting Rights Act to have these voting changes pre-cleared by either the Department of Justice (DOJ) or a panel of federal judges. Before they may be implemented, DOJ must certify that these laws do not have the purpose or effect of restricting voting by racial or language minority groups.

Thus far, South Carolina and Texas both have submitted applications to DOJ that have been formally opposed in written submissions. DOJ has requested further information from both states, and the applications are on hold. Alabama's ID requirements do not take effect until 2014, so the state has not yet applied to DOJ for preclearance. Mississippi's voter ID requirement was approved by voters on November 8, 2011, so a preclearance request has not yet been submitted.

B. Proof of Citizenship

Laws mandating presentation of proof of citizenship likewise impose a potentially insurmountable burden and have been adopted largely in response to allegations of problems that evidence reveals to be illusory. Investigations have failed to identify a confirmed case of a noncitizen intentionally registering or voting while aware that s/he was not eligible to do so.

Aggressive enforcement efforts by the Bush Administration produced a mere 14 convictions for voting fraud involving noncitizens between 2002 and 2005. Though there is no significant evidence of noncitizens voting, there are a sizable number of Americans for whom obtaining documentary proof of citizenship is difficult or impossible. A Brennan Center poll concluded that an estimated 7% of Americans – more than 13 million people – do not have ready access to proof of their citizenship. People with low incomes, the elderly, women, and people of color living in rural areas are among those least likely to have appropriate documentation. As birth registration was becoming standard practice throughout the

U.S. in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, for example, Native Americans, children born to Spanish-speaking families, and others with minimal access to formal healthcare remained significantly less likely than their urban and white counterparts to have their births officially recorded. Such individuals often cannot obtain a delayed birth certificate because no living birth witness is available.² In at least one state requiring documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote, many delayed birth certificates will not be counted as acceptable documentation, and the law will impose an absolute bar on voting for these individuals. In addition, the Brennan Center's poll concluded that citizens earning less than \$25,000 per year are more than twice as likely to lack ready documentation of their citizenship as those earning more than \$25,000, and that as many as 32 million women of voting age lack documentation of citizenship reflecting their current legal names.

Proof-of-citizenship laws are far more likely to prevent American citizens from accessing the ballot box than to stop noncitizens attempting to vote illegally. For example, in Arizona, 37,000

registration applications have been rejected since 2006 for lack of proof of citizenship. But in the 10 years prior to the passage of that state's proof-of-citizenship law, a mere 20 cases of suspected voting by noncitizens were recorded. It is likely, therefore, that almost all of those impacted by the law are qualified voters lacking the required documentation. The legal advocacy groups continue to pursue a legal challenge to one of the first proof-of-citizenship requirements imposed by a state in the modern era, in the case of *Gonzalez v. Arizona*. This case is presently before the Ninth Circuit, awaiting a decision by the Court en banc. On October 26, 2010, a panel of the Ninth Circuit ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the ACLU, finding that the National Voter Registration Act superseded Arizona's proof-of-citizenship measure and rendered it invalid.

C. Restrictions on Registration Leading Up to an Election

Laws that restrict the time allowed for voter registration prior to an election, and that limit the ability to record a change of address close in time to an election, merely serve as an unjustified hindrance on voting participation. For example, Florida's H.B. 1355, which became law on May 19, 2011, eliminated the ability to submit address changes within Florida (that is, from one Florida address to another) on the day of an election, except for active-duty military families. The likely effect of this change in policy is that individuals who have the poor fortune to move just prior to an election will be disfranchised for no other reason but bad timing. Victims of the law are likely to be disproportionately African American and Latino, given that Pew Research Center data shows these demographic groups move more frequently than do whites – 43% of African Americans and 48% of Latinos moved between 2003 and 2008, compared to just 27% of whites. Relocating should not cause someone to lose his or her right to vote.

A varied patchwork of state rules surrounding residence, moves, and voter registration breeds confusion, and excludes those with more precarious housing arrangements. The documented cases in 2008 in which Ohio voters were threatened with prosecution when requesting absentee ballots less than thirty days after registering, even though both federal and state courts had upheld the voters' right to register and request an absentee ballot on the same day.³⁰ Enhanced residence prerequisites to registration have also been used in attempts to prevent students from voting where they attend school.

D. Early Voting

Generous early voting periods, that include weekend days, facilitate voter participation. Early voting eases congestion at polling places on Election Day, and thereby improves the efficient operation of elections by reducing the ratio of poll workers to voters. Early voting periods also afford extra time to address registration problems and other barriers to voting that can keep votes from being cast and counted if encountered for the first time on Election Day itself. Thus states' proposals to reduce voting periods may result in further obstacles to voting or possible

diminished voter turnout. Recently, Ohio repealed Sunday voting, eliminating the convenience of weekend voting for those unable to make it to the polls on a workday.

Given the flexibility early voting affords citizens, it is not surprising that many voters have taken advantage of this option. In states like Tennessee, Nevada, Oregon, and Florida, more than half of all votes in recent elections have been cast during early voting periods or by absentee ballot.

In 2008, 13% of all votes nationwide were cast during early voting periods.³⁵ Additionally, early voting options are used more frequently by voters of color than by white voters. In Florida in 2008, for example, African Americans comprised 13% of the electorate, but cast 22% of early votes.³⁶ Nearly 54% of African American voters in Florida cast their ballots before Election Day, compared with 27% of white voters.

Likewise, more than half of African American voters in North Carolina voted early in 2008, compared to about 40% of white North Carolina voters.³⁸ This history strongly suggests that reducing early voting periods will not only complicate administration of polling places on Election Day, but have a disparate negative impact on voting by people of color. As the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College

reports, “[t]here is no evidence that any form of convenience voting has led to higher levels of fraud.”

E. Third-Party Voter Registration Restrictions

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) signaled the advent of enhanced federal efforts to facilitate widespread voter registration. The bill was premised on the concern that “discriminatory and unfair registration laws and procedures can have a direct and damaging

effect on voter participation in elections for Federal office and disproportionately harm voter participation by various groups, including racial minorities.” Among other provisions aimed at redressing barriers to election participation, the NVRA authorized registration by mail-in form, and emphasized that the forms must be made available to private entities wishing to conduct voter registration drives. Third-party organizations have responded by helping many more millions register to vote. For example, during the 2004 election cycle alone, the non-profit Project Vote registered 1.2 million voters.⁴¹ During the 2008 cycle, Rock the Vote registered 2.5 million voters.

Not surprisingly, efforts to restrict voting participation have included imposing unjustified restrictions on third-party registration activities. Restrictions that apply only to third-party registration efforts and not to other registrars of voters will result in fewer Americans registered, and fewer Americans participating in our democracy. For example, Florida’s 2011 H.B. 1355 dramatically shortens the period of time third-party organizations have to return completed applications to the state; require third-party registrars of voters to register themselves with the state and submit names and sworn statements of each person who will conduct registration activities on the organization’s behalf; and sets potentially heavy fines for non-compliance, among other provisions.

Already, Florida’s new third-party registration restrictions have prompted the League of Women Voters to announce plans to end registration activities in the state, and other groups may be forced to do the same.⁴⁴ As with many of the other restrictions cited in this statement, such

proposals have a disproportionate impact on voters of color. Based on nationwide statistics, in 2008, more than one-third of voters who registered through third-party drives were racial minorities though minorities constituted only approximately 18% of the voting age citizen population. African American and Latino voters register with third-party groups at twice the rate of other voters.⁴⁷ Moves to restrict third-party registration will effectively chill registration and election participation among historically disfranchised people.

F. Criminal Disfranchisement

Millions of Americans have had their right to vote revoked because of criminal convictions.

Upon release from incarceration, these citizens work, pay taxes, live in our communities and bring up families, yet they are without a voice. An estimated 5.3 million citizens cannot vote as a result of felony convictions, and nearly 4 million of those are not in prison, but are living and working in the community.

States have vastly different approaches to voting eligibility for those with a criminal conviction.

Some states permanently disfranchise some, but not all, citizens with felony convictions, while others allow voting after a sentence is completed or after release from prison.⁴⁹ Despite a trend over the last decade of increasing access to the polls, this year, governors in two states – Florida and Iowa – enacted regressive policy changes to make it nearly impossible for people with past convictions to ever regain their voting rights. Those states now join Kentucky and Virginia in essentially imposing lifetime voting bans on people with felony records. In Florida alone, an estimated one million citizens may be affected by this draconian policy. Two states, Maine and Vermont, allow all persons with felony convictions to vote, even while incarcerated; all other states fall somewhere in between. Unfortunately, this patchwork of voting laws has caused widespread confusion about the proper administration of state laws that, in turn, has contributed to the disfranchisement of even eligible citizens.

Worse still, criminal disfranchisement laws are rooted in the Jim Crow era and were originally intended to bar minorities from voting. The impact of these laws continues today. Nationwide

13% of African American men have lost the right to vote – a rate seven times the national average. Contributing to the disfranchisement, African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system.⁵⁴ Surveys show that whites, African Americans, and Latinos in the U.S. use and sell illegal drugs at very similar rates, but two-thirds of all those incarcerated in state prisons for drug offenses are African American or Latino.

This is true at a time when African Americans constitute just 12.6% of the U.S. population, and Latinos 16.3%.⁵⁶ In turn, this has impacted the families of those who are disfranchised and the communities in which they reside by reducing their collective political voice. By continuing to deny citizens the right to vote based on past criminal convictions, the government is endorsing a system that expects these citizens to contribute to the community, but denies them participation in our democracy. Not only is the disfranchisement of millions of citizens undemocratic, but it is counterproductive to the rehabilitation of those released from prison and their reintegration into society.

As the New York Times recently opined, “[f]ully integrating ex-offenders back into society is...the best way to encourage their lasting rehabilitation. It is past time for all states to restore individual voting rights automatically to ex-offenders who have served their time.”(Their Debt is Paid, NYTimes, 10/20/10 www.nytimes.com/2010/10/20/opinion/20wed4.html?_r=2&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss.)

Another 4 million to 5 million people reported administrative problems as their reason for not registering. With just less than 10 million votes separating the candidates in the 2008 elections, and additional legal obstacles now in effect in a number of states, voting barriers could easily become determinative of election outcomes.

II. The Impact of Restricting Access to the Vote

The chilling impact of new state-level voting restrictions is not just a theory based on statistics and extrapolation: it is a known fact, featuring real victims. Citizen surveys as well as individual anecdotes tell this story.

It has been known for some time that the move toward requiring photo ID to vote and proof of citizenship to register results in fewer votes cast, particularly by people of color and others disproportionately unlikely to possess the relevant documents. The New York Times noted that imposition of identification requirements had reduced turnout in the 2004 election by about 3%, but disproportionately reduced turnout by minorities by two to three times as much. Studies offer further confirmation that from state to state, as well as nationally, voter ID laws depress voter participation, particularly among people of color, people with disabilities, and other groups who have been historically excluded from elections.⁶³ The coming years will demonstrate the similar impact of new policies that reduce opportunities to register, to amend registration, and to vote before Election Day.

III. Dispelling the Myths Behind Voting Restrictions

Proponents of restrictions on the right to vote allege that controls are needed to combat the danger of voting fraud, and further, that measures like requiring photo ID to vote will not impose any significant burden on voters. Evidence tells a different story, however: while there is little indication of fraud in elections, and even less reason to suspect that any improper voting is intentionally done, millions of Americans will be less able and likely to vote as a result of voter ID and other limitations emerging in state laws.

A. Lack of Documented Fraud

Nationally, an intensive anti-fraud initiative conducted by the Bush Administration's Department of Justice between 2002 and 2007 resulted in just 86 voting fraud convictions for more than 300 million votes cast, and most of these targets were immigrants and

former felons who were simply unaware of their ineligibility. Investigations in state after state also have consistently failed to produce evidence to justify fear of intentional voting fraud.

A statewide survey conducted in Ohio uncovered a mere four instances of ineligible people voting in the 2002 and 2004 elections, out of nine million votes cast during that period.

In Texas, some 50 million votes have been cast since 2002, yet only one documented case has emerged of a person falsely claiming the identity of someone else for voting purposes.

In Alabama, sponsors of this year's voter ID legislation were able to identify only three cases of voter fraud in the state since 2008, none of which dealt with voters misrepresenting themselves during the registration process or at polling places. South Carolina, which also passed restrictive voting legislation this year, recorded not one single report of voting fraud during the 2008 election.

Legislation requiring voters to show photo ID at the polls is the most popular recent form of voting restriction considered by the states. But the kind of fraud that such restrictions could stop

– impersonation of a registered voter – simply does not exist to any significant degree. None of the 70 voting fraud convictions obtained by federal prosecutors from October 2002 to September 2005 was based on in-person voter impersonation. The Election Assistance Commission concluded in 2006 that voter impersonation “is probably the least frequent type of [election] fraud.” It is so rarely seen, in fact, that instances of in-person impersonation fraud at the polls happen less often than lightning striking a person.⁷⁸ In part, this is because in-person fraud by individual voters is an ineffective way to influence an election. There are severe criminal penalties for voter fraud in federal elections, and in return, it yields at most one additional vote.⁷⁹

B. Fraud Allegations Do Not Withstand Scrutiny

When state officials have argued that fraud has occurred on anything approaching a large scale, their allegations have relied upon seriously flawed methodology. For example, New Mexico Secretary of State Dianna Duran announced in March that she had identified 37 cases of registered voters whose names matched names on a list of foreign nationals, as well as 117 registrants whose names did not match their social security numbers.⁸⁰ There was no indication, however, that she had confirmed whether or not these individuals had become naturalized citizens before voting, nor that her office had conducted investigation into the extent to which clerical errors – a common occurrence where handwritten registration documents must be entered into computer databases – were responsible for non-matches.⁸¹

Similarly, Colorado Secretary of State Scott Gessler released a report earlier this year that alleged that 11,805 Coloradans who were foreign nationals were registered to vote.⁸² His report covered the years 2006-11, during which time more than 32,000 Colorado residents became naturalized citizens. Secretary Gessler’s report failed to conclusively establish that even one of

these individuals was not a citizen at the time of his or her voter registration, because it revealed his office had not accessed citizenship information held by the federal government. Though he submitted that 106 individuals registered to vote prior to providing documentation indicating immigrant status to obtain a driver's license, this fact fails as proof of fraud, given that naturalized citizens often possess documents identifying themselves as legally present immigrants even after the date of their naturalization. In sum, widespread voting fraud has not yet, or ever, been demonstrated to exist through sound, validated analysis.

C. Anti-Fraud Measures Have Chilled Voter Participation

Though the fraud that new state voting restrictions supposedly redress is an illusion, massive disfranchisement of Americans through the implementation of these restrictions is a reality. A recent academic study concluded that approximately 2.2 million registered voters did not or could not vote in 2008 because of a lack of identification.⁸⁵ In coming elections, this number is likely to grow, as millions more voters who lack identification become subject to strict photo ID requirements. In 2008, only two states, Georgia and Indiana, required in-person voters to produce one of a limited number of acceptable photo IDs. As of November 10, 2011, eight more states – Kansas, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Texas, Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi – will impose similar requirements on voters during or after the 2012 election cycle. Based on what we know about those who lack identification and struggle with barriers to obtaining it, these excluded voters were disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities.

A 2010 report from the South Carolina State Elections Commission, for example, found that 178,175 registered voters in the state did not possess either a driver's license or identification card issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles. African Americans constitute 30.4% of registered voters in South Carolina, but a disproportionate 35.8% of voters who lack a DMV-issued photo identification.

Many proponents have argued that, since photo IDs are required for so many common purposes, like driving a car or boarding an airplane, producing an ID for voting does not impose a great burden. Such comparisons are misplaced. Voting is not a privilege like driving or flying.

Rather, it is a fundamental right guaranteed by more constitutional amendments than any other right we have as Americans.

Because of the primary importance of the franchise, any law that threatens to make it more difficult to vote faces the strongest constitutional scrutiny. By contrast, actions like buying alcohol, driving, and flying are not constitutionally enshrined, and can be limited by restrictions, such as ID requirements, so long as restrictions are applied evenly and are justified by a legitimate government interest.

I urge states to revisit the use of voter IDs, proof-of-citizenship requirements, restrictions imposed on registrations, voting periods, criminal disenfranchisement laws and other voter suppression tactics. I will continue to fight these laws in state legislatures and courts. However, trying to turn back the tide on such regressive state measures state-by-state is not enough. Affirmative federal work is necessary. As it did by passing the historic Voting Rights Act, the National Voter Registration Act, and the Help America Vote Act, Congress should work for passage of uniform federal laws designed to protect, restore, and expand all citizens' fundamental right to vote. Such proposals should include passage of the Democracy Restoration Act to restore the federal voting rights of those living in our communities, but denied their political voice due to a past criminal conviction.

Other reforms should include providing affidavit alternatives to voter ID and citizenship requirements, modernizing voter registration processes, banning deceptive practices about when and where to vote, eliminating mandatory excuses to vote by mail, and developing uniform federal standards for early voting and casting and counting provisional ballots in federal elections.

I urge the Department of Justice to continue to fully enforce federal laws where states violate citizens' fundamental rights by the passage of new regressive voting laws. I call upon the DOJ to ensure

compliance with the Voting Rights Act (VRA). I urge DOJ to scrutinize new voting restrictions aggressively for discriminatory impact, refuse to pre-clear laws under Section 5 of the VRA that have a discriminatory purpose or effect, and to bring cases under Section 2 of the VRA in other states where necessary to challenge regressive voter laws. As a new election fast approaches Congress must continue to provide the Department of Justice and other federal entities with the resources and support they need order to enforce the laws that guarantee Americans broad and nondiscriminatory access to the ballot.

Measures that repress voting are a dangerous and misguided step backward in our ongoing quest for a more democratic society and we commend this forum's attention to the impact of these new restrictive state voting laws.