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Election 2012: Voter ID Laws, Suppression, and Equality

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Voting. It's a seemingly simple act, and most Americans either take it for granted or are doubtful of its actual effect on our everyday lives. One vote being cast in a sea of millions may seem insignificant, but when we step back to look at the tumultuous history of voting rights in our country, the real-world effects of voting, and the current efforts to suppress certain groups of voters, it becomes clear that voting is a vital right and an act that intersects with every aspect of the issues we care about.

History of Voting Rights and Disenfranchisement in the U.S.

Voter suppression and disenfranchisement are nothing new in our country. After our country was founded and the Constitution was adopted in 1787, only white, male property owners (a mere 10 percent to 16 percent of the nation's population) had the right to vote. The act of voting was reserved for rich, white males, leaving out women, minorities, and poor people. Voting was slowly expanded throughout the 1800s to other groups of men, but ways to suppress the vote of non-white and non-wealthy citizens ran rampant throughout the country. Literacy tests and poll taxes, prerequisites for voting, had the effect of disenfranchising many people of color as well as poor whites. States even made up impossible hurdles for voting, like the "eight box law," whereby voters were required to place ballots in correct boxes, which were then shifted throughout the day. The battle for women's suffrage went on even longer. Voting rights for women were first proposed in July 1848, yet it took 72 years of protest and activism for the 19th Amendment to become law in 1920.

It wasn't until 1957 that the Civil Rights Act was passed, setting up the Civil Rights Commission, which has among its duties investigation into voter discrimination. Disenfranchising poll taxes were finally outlawed in 1964 with the adoption of the 24th Amendment. In 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed to protect the rights of minority voters, eliminating voting barriers such as the literacy test.

With the often bloody and hard struggles to win and protect voting, it is amazing, yet perhaps not surprising, given our history, that a new move to roll back these hard-won rights is underway in many states around the country.

Current Voter Suppression and Disenfranchisement Efforts

It seems that many in our country haven't learned from this past and are doomed to repeat it.

In 2011 Republicans gained control of both chambers in 26 state legislatures, with 21 of those states also having GOP governors. Republican-controlled legislatures have passed a wide range of new bills that restrict, rather than broaden, access to the voting rights.

The [numbers are staggering](#). At least 180 restrictive bills have been introduced in 41 states since the beginning of 2011. There are 27 restrictive bills currently pending in six states. Twenty-five laws and two executive actions have passed in 19 states since the beginning of 2011. Seventeen states have passed restrictive voting laws that have the potential to affect the 2012 election; these states account for 218 electoral votes, or nearly 80 percent of the total needed to win the presidency. These GOP-led efforts impose a series of new restrictions on voting: strict, new voter-ID laws, limits on voter-registration drives, and closing early-voting windows, which creates fewer voting precincts and longer lines.

Photo ID mandates are the most pervasive new restriction on the right to vote. In 2011 Republicans proposed in more than 30 states laws requiring Americans to possess and show unexpired, government-issued photo identification as a prerequisite to voting. The new requirements and costs associated with photo-ID laws are quite simply a new form of poll tax. And the laws don't solve any problem with voter fraud. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University found [fraud by individual voters is both irrational and extremely rare](#), saying:

Because voter fraud is essentially irrational, it is not surprising that no credible evidence suggests a voter fraud epidemic. There is no documented wave or trend of individuals voting multiple times, voting as someone else, or voting despite knowing that they are ineligible... Most allegations of voter fraud simply evaporate when more rigorous analysis is conducted.

This year the [Department of Justice has struck down voter-ID laws](#) in Texas, Florida, South Carolina, and Wisconsin under the Voting Rights Act, which mandates that states with a history of racially discriminatory voting procedures get their laws cleared by the DOJ. But many states either have tougher laws that disenfranchise voters or are still in the middle of the judicial

process that will decide if these laws stand. This uncertainty in the laws around voting rights and requirements creates confusion and doubt and further alienates voters in targeted groups.

Beyond Numbers: Voter Suppression's Impacts

Each tactic disproportionately burdens the same voters: youth, students, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, seniors, low-income voters, and Americans with disabilities. Voter-suppression efforts, like newly enacted photo-ID laws, will also have a disproportionately harmful impact on those who are transgender. According to a recent study by the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, over [25,000 otherwise eligible transgender voters could be turned away at their polling places](#) come November due to the potential discrepancy between a voter's gender identity and his or her designated sex on state-issued identification. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) found [over 40 percent of transgender men and women do not have an ID that accurately reflects their gender](#).

As a result of the impact on these various voting groups, the Brennan Center for Justice estimates that as many as [5 million voters could be disenfranchised in the 2012 election](#).

Removing these voters from the equation affects not only the presidential race (which could have dire consequences on many policies affecting the country) but down-ticket races for state legislature and judge seats (which could have a huge impact on issues like women's rights and LGBT equality). The removal of voters more likely to lean socially moderate or liberal also has a potentially outcome-altering impact on state ballot initiatives, like gay-marriage bans on the ballots in many states in 2012.

For example, almost all the Republican photo-ID mandates make it more difficult for students to vote. In Texas you can vote with a gun license but not a student ID. South Carolina and Tennessee expressly prohibit the use of student IDs, while Wisconsin allows student IDs but has strict qualifications that no university ID in the state currently meets. Suppressing young, progressive voters does more than just changing the outcome of one presidential election: It shapes social policy by removing their voices from the process and disenfranchising them for years to come. This would set progress on social issues back decades, from reproductive rights to minority issues to LGBT equality.

We have seen throughout our history how restricting voting rights doesn't strengthen us as a country; it muffles the voices of the very people who most need to be heard. Voter suppression and disenfranchisement is about fear of progress and change. Silencing swathes of the electorate for political gain may seem like a good idea in the short run, but it causes our country to stagnate. These laws prove some haven't learned from the mistakes and growth of those before us who fought and died for the right to cast that ballot on Election Day.

Voting can't be taken for granted, nor can its impact on us all.

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