



*Via Email*

June 24, 2015

Senator Chuck E. Grassley, Chairman  
Senator Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Bob Goodlatte, Chairman  
Representative John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member  
House Committee on the Judiciary  
2138 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Voting Rights Advancement Act

Dear Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Leahy, Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Conyers, and Members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees:

On behalf of Project Vote, I am writing in support of the Voting Rights Advancement Act ("Advancement Act"), introduced today in both the House and Senate. Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, non-profit organization dedicated to building an electorate that accurately represents the diversity of America's citizenry. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that every eligible citizen can register, vote, and cast a ballot that counts.

The Advancement Act's introduction coincides with the two-year anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a decision that dramatically limited the efficacy of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). But in its decision, the Court recognized that racial discrimination in voting continues, and invited Congress to "update" the coverage formula in Section 4 of the Act used to determine what jurisdictions would be subject to federal preclearance in the future.

The Advancement Act is a direct response to this invitation. It reinstates the indispensable safeguard provided by preclearance: that discriminatory voting changes can be stopped or ameliorated prior to implementation, before anyone's voting rights are actually violated. The Advancement Act also recognizes that modern-day voting discrimination has taken on different forms since the Voting Rights Act was first passed, and that these current

challenges along with the changing demographics of our country require nationwide protections for voters. To prevent discriminatory voting changes from having an invisible, pernicious impact on our elections, the Advancement Act also recognizes the importance of making voting changes public and transparent.

Project Vote urges you to support this important bill. Without the safeguard of preclearance of voting changes in jurisdictions with particularly troubling histories of discrimination, their residents do not have adequate tools to combat racially motivated policies. In the time since the *Shelby County* decision, states and counties previously under preclearance have been able to enforce problematic policies with impunity. For example:

- Decatur, Alabama: In 2011, the city's plan to change its city council election method from five single-member districts to three single- and two at-large- districts was subject to preclearance, and was withdrawn when the Department of Justice (DOJ) asked for more information. After *Shelby* was decided, the city implemented the plan.
- State of Georgia: After *Shelby*, the Georgia Secretary of State announced that the 2014 election for Augusta-Richmond County would be held at the time of the primary rather than the general election, reinstating a plan that DOJ had objected to because it would disproportionately harm minority turnout.
- State of Texas: Immediately after the *Shelby* decision, the state's Attorney General announced that its strict photo ID law, which had been denied preclearance by both DOJ and a federal court, would go into effect immediately.
- Galveston County, Texas: DOJ had objected to a proposed reduction in the number of justice of the peace and constable districts because it would have a disparate impact on minority voters, but the county implemented the plan a few days after the *Shelby* decision.

Free from federal oversight since the *Shelby* decision, lawmakers across the country have continued to adopt discriminatory policies and voting restrictions that make it harder for Americans to exercise their right to vote. Despite mounting evidence of such modern-day voting discrimination running rampant throughout our country, Congress has failed to restore the VRA.

For 50 years, the Voting Rights Act has successfully operated as a bipartisan tool to protect citizens from racial discrimination in voting. Reauthorized by overwhelming bipartisan majorities since its initial passage, the Voting Rights Act stopped discriminatory mechanisms such as literacy tests and poll taxes. In recent years, the Act has worked to block newer practices such as redistricting and voter photo ID. The means of racial discrimination in voting may have changed, but the presence of such discrimination has not. Congress must follow the mandate under the Constitution to eliminate racial discrimination in voting by restoring the full efficacy of the Voting Rights Act.

Recent events have reminded us that this country is still grappling fiercely with issues of violence, discrimination, and inequality. The protections of the Voting Rights Act are every bit as vital now as they were 50 years ago, and Congress must act now to restore them if we as a nation are to go forward, not backwards.

Sincerely,

Michael Slater  
President  
Project Vote