



Strengthening Democracy: Voting Rights

The right to vote is fundamental in the United States. Protecting and strengthening that right is key to achieving a multiracial, inclusive democracy. Yet we are living through the greatest assault on voting rights in more than half a century. Black and Brown people in the Deep South face heightened barriers to participation in our elections and governance, from laws that restrict voting access to discriminatory redistricting, the disenfranchisement of people impacted by the criminal legal system, and the growing intensity of natural disasters during election season without adequate safeguards for ballot access. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) advocates for policies that protect and expand access to the ballot and strongly opposes those that make it harder for Black and Brown communities to vote at the state and federal level, and we work year-round alongside communities on the front lines of the fight for our democracy in the Deep South.

Key Priorities to Strengthen Democracy

Safeguard and Strengthen the Fundamental Right to Vote

Restrictive voting laws have proliferated over the last several years, especially in the Deep South. New anti-voter laws criminalize community members and nonprofit organizations helping voters to apply for and submit absentee ballots, permit bad actors to challenge voters' eligibility on a mass scale and based on faulty evidence, make it difficult or impossible for nonprofit organizations to register voters, and require documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote. Anti-voter lawmakers in Washington are pushing the SAVE Act, draconian federal legislation that would make it harder for millions of eligible Americans to vote, especially Black and Brown people, married women, rural and low-income people, people with disabilities, and others. The SPLC defends against these discriminatory laws through advocacy and organizing at the state and federal level. We have helped to prevent passage of the SAVE Act in Congress to date, and we are demanding passage of pro-voter legislation that would restore and modernize the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and create federal minimum standards for election administration. We advocate for sufficient, consistent federal funding for election administration, so that our frontline democracy workers have the resources they need to run safe, accessible elections and no eligible voter is prevented from voting by long lines or closed polling places.

Defend Against Racial Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is a process by which politicians choose their voters instead of voters being able to choose who represents them — and to hold those leaders accountable. Gerrymandering is among the most consistent and effective tactics used to disenfranchise Black and Brown voters in the Deep South. Dozens of lawsuits have been filed challenging maps drawn as part of the 2021 redistricting cycle because they discriminate against voters based on race/ethnicity or political party. The SPLC works to defend against these efforts through advocacy in Deep South legislatures and, when racially discriminatory maps do pass, by challenging them in court. This redistricting cycle, the SPLC has won victories in:

- Alabama, giving Black voters in Montgomery a shot at fairer representation in their state Senate.
- Mississippi, allowing Black residents to have a chance at fair representation in their state Supreme Court for the first time ever.
- Jacksonville, Florida, ensuring a fair voice for Black Jacksonville residents at the City Council.

An SPLC case for fair representation for Black residents in Abbeville, Louisiana, is still pending, but the lawsuit and community advocacy are positively impacting the City Council's consideration of new maps. SPLC cases for fairer congressional and local school board maps in Georgia are still pending.

End the Disenfranchisement of Voters With Felony Convictions

In many states, people convicted of felony offenses are deprived of the right to vote. Some jurisdictions extend this denial of voting rights long past sentences imposed by a court, sometimes for life. Across the Deep South — Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi — more than 1.5 million voting-age residents are disenfranchised due to felony convictions, nearly half of whom are Black and Latinx. Nationally, 4 million U.S. citizens who are no longer incarcerated are denied the right to vote due to a criminal conviction. The SPLC works to challenge these discriminatory laws and to ensure incarcerated people who remain eligible can access their voting rights. In 2023, the SPLC won a groundbreaking victory for disenfranchised voters in Mississippi, overturning the state's lifetime ban on voting for people with disqualifying convictions, but the full appeals court vacated that decision, allowing Mississippi's discriminatory regime to stand. We also advocate for legislation limiting or eliminating felony disenfranchisement, and we work to connect eligible incarcerated people with opportunities to vote.

Enshrine Protections for Voters Affected by Disasters

The Deep South is uniquely vulnerable to hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, and even wildfires. As these disasters continue to escalate in intensity, their impact on the voting process will intensify, too. When a disaster strikes near or on Election Day, voters may have trouble finding their ID, their polling places may have changed, or their ability to travel to the polls may be limited; they may have even evacuated out of their voting district. In some states, elections may be delayed, and election officials may find themselves scrambling to adjust. We are working to analyze the impact of extreme weather and natural disasters on election systems in the Deep South and to advocate for changes to state law and policy that would afford election officials more flexibility in the wake of disasters, to ensure they can run safe, accessible elections and all eligible voters can cast a ballot. We advocate for increased state and federal funding for election administration so election workers can ensure elections remain accessible.

Recommendations for Congress

- Adopt measures to ensure voting access for all eligible voters, such as the Freedom to Vote Act and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.
- Provide consistent, significant funding to states and localities for election administration through the annual appropriations process.
- Consider legislation to ensure all eligible voters can access the ballot in the wake of extreme weather and natural disasters.
- Reject all efforts to limit the franchise, restrict voting access or otherwise make it harder to vote.

Deep South State Priorities to Strengthen Democracy

Alabama

Passing an Alabama State Voting Rights Act: The multiyear battle over redistricting and representation, resulting in a second opportunity district for Black Alabamians, demonstrates both the ongoing presence of racial discrimination in voting in the state and the importance of a fair and just democracy. Yet onerous voter ID requirements, polling precinct changes, and the closure of nearly half of the DMV offices who issue that documentation in majority-Black counties mean that voting in person remains a challenge. Furthermore, Alabama's early voting is limited to the cumbersome and restrictive absentee process.

Recommendation: The Alabama Legislature should pass the Alabama Voting Rights Act, which would make voting in person and absentee a convenient, accessible process, and which would create extra safeguards for voters in counties that engage in racial discrimination in the electoral process.

Florida

Creating a Bill of Rights for Voters Affected by Disasters: Florida is known to have active hurricane seasons, with this past 2024 season being one of the most destructive on record. Hurricane season spans June 1 to Nov. 30, overlapping several election dates and important electoral deadlines. No eligible Florida voter should be disenfranchised because of a natural disaster, nor should they face a struggle to cast their ballot while they are managing their own and their community's recovery.

Recommendation: The Florida Legislature must amend the state's elections emergency contingency plan to provide flexibility and support to elections supervisors in counties named in a state of emergency declaration

by the Florida governor or similarly designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Doing so will help ensure voters affected by disasters have an equal opportunity to participate in elections.

Georgia

Ending Felony Disenfranchisement: Georgia is home to one of the largest disenfranchised populations in the country, with more than a quarter-million residents barred from voting due to felony convictions. Ending this practice is essential for racial justice and democracy and would restore the right to vote for tens of thousands of Black Georgians in particular. Through grassroots mobilization, bipartisan outreach and strategic lobbying, we have built real momentum for reform. The Rights Restoration Coalition of Georgia — anchored by the SPLC and led by directly impacted Georgians — continues to elevate personal stories and demand an end to this Reconstruction-era policy.

Recommendation: The SPLC leads our coalition efforts to secure the legislative approval for a constitutional amendment ending felony disenfranchisement. Elected officials should approve a constitutional amendment to end felony disenfranchisement, support directly impacted leaders driving the campaign and uphold public accountability throughout the process.

Louisiana

Creating a Bill of Rights for Voters Affected by Disasters: This year's commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina highlighted the devastation a large weather event causes to residents and governmental operations, as well as the unaddressed infrastructure needs left exposed to future threats. Hurricane season spans June 1 to Nov. 30, overlapping several election dates and important electoral deadlines. Experts predict above-average storm activity this year, with a high probability of Louisiana facing hurricane impacts this season. No eligible Louisiana voter should be disenfranchised because of a natural disaster, nor should they face a struggle to cast their ballot while they are managing their own and their community's recovery.

Recommendation: The Louisiana Legislature must amend the state's elections emergency contingency plan to provide flexibility and support to local election officials in parishes named in a state of emergency declaration by the governor or similarly designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Doing so will help ensure voters affected by disasters have an equal opportunity to participate in elections.

Mississippi

Pass Early Voting: Mississippi is one of only three states nationally that does not allow for early voting or no-excuse absentee voting for anyone not on a very narrow list of approved exceptions. The extremely limited voting options are especially burdensome for voters with disabilities, those who work long hours, those with limited transportation options, elderly voters, and anyone with a conflict on Election Day — making participation lower in Mississippi than it otherwise could be.

Recommendation: The Mississippi Legislature should pass legislation allowing for an extended early voting period, including at least two weekends before primary and general elections. It should also enact no-excuse absentee voting for all Mississippians, so that no one is prevented from voting because they cannot show up in person.



For more information, contact
Laura Williamson (laura.williamson@splcenter.org)

For more information on the SPLC's work,
visit our website at splcenter.org/policy-advocacy
or scan here.



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