

Voting Rights Landscape

NCJ 

National Council of Jewish Women



The laws below are among those that shape the voting rights landscape at the national level.

US Constitution

Various amendments to the US Constitution have expanded who is able to vote.

- The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, states that the right to vote cannot be abridged based on a citizen's "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Essentially it granted the right to vote to formerly enslaved men.
- The 19th Amendment expanded the right to vote to women in 1920 (although women of color did not gain practical access to the ballot at this time).
- In 1961, residents of the District of Columbia were granted the right to vote in the presidential election by the 23rd Amendment.
- The 24th Amendment banned Congress and the states from conditioning the right to vote on payment of a poll tax (or other tax). It was ratified during the Civil Rights Movement in 1964, when five states still retained a poll tax.
- In 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18.

Voting Rights Act (VRA)

Race, gender, and other immutable characteristics have historically been used to deprive countless Americans of the right to vote. Congress passed the landmark Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965, which sought to prevent such discrimination by prohibiting states from making any voting changes without federal review to ensure that any change would not have a discriminatory impact. The VRA also barred denying the right of any citizen to vote on account of race or color. Congress has since expanded the law five times, most recently in 2006.

The passage of the VRA had an immediate positive impact on voting rights, particularly for voters of color. Later amendments to the VRA also helped enfranchise language minority voters. Between 1982 and 2006, the Department of Justice blocked more than 700 voting changes because they would have prohibited voters of color from participating in the political process or limited their electoral impact.

Shelby v. Holder

In 2013, the US Supreme Court decision in [*Shelby County v. Holder*](#) gutted the section of the VRA that determined which jurisdictions had to submit changes to voting laws to the federal government prior to implementation so they could be checked for discriminatory impact. Without federal oversight, several states and jurisdictions immediately enacted restrictive voting laws, including ID requirements that were previously barred by the federal government because of their discriminatory impact.

Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee

In 2021, the Supreme Court upheld two Arizona voting provisions that civil rights groups challenged as disproportionately burdening minority voters. In doing so, the majority opinion severely limited future challenges to voting laws that could be brought under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. (Section 2 prohibits practices and procedures that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership in a language minority group.)

Allen v. Milligan

In 2023, the Supreme Court decision in [*Allen v. Milligan*](#) held that Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act is constitutional in the redistricting context. After the 2020 census, Alabama created a redistricting plan that illegally packed Black voters into a single district while dividing other clusters of Black voters into other districts in efforts to dilute Black votes. The majority opinion limited future challenges to voting rights as it once again upheld Section 2 of the VRA.

In 2021, 49 states introduced more than 440 bills to restrict access to voting for millions of American citizens; 34 became law in 19 states. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, women, older Americans, people with disabilities, young folks, and people working to make ends meet are particularly affected by restrictive voter laws, such as limits on early voting and burdensome ID requirements. There are federal efforts to pass legislation to restore this key part of the VRA, but they have yet to garner bipartisan support or success.

National Voter Registration Act (NVRA)

Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), also known as the Motor Voter Act, in 1993. In the first quarter of 1995 (when the act was implemented), two million new voters were registered.

The law's purpose was to increase voter participation by making it easy to register to vote. It requires states to offer voter registration opportunities to any eligible individual who applies for or renews a driver's license or applies for public assistance. Further, the law prevents states from removing voters from the registration rolls if they fail to vote or move (barring written notification of the move/failure to respond to a notice from the registrar). The NVRA also contains some election integrity provisions.

Help America Vote Act (HAVA)

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was enacted in 2002 to give voters basic rights and protections including:

- The right to verify (in a private and independent manner) one's vote before casting a ballot.
- The opportunity (in a private/independent manner) to change one's ballot or correct any error before casting the ballot.
- If needed, the opportunity to correct an error by using a replacement ballot.
- If the voter accidentally selects more than one candidate for a single office:
 - The right to be notified by election officials that they have selected multiple candidates for a single office on the ballot.
 - The right to be notified by election officials, before the ballot is cast and counted, of the effect of casting multiple votes for the office.
 - The right to correct the ballot before the ballot is cast and counted.

To comply with HAVA, all states or jurisdictions that use a paper ballot voting system, a punch card voting system, or a central count voting system — including mail-in absentee ballots and mail-in ballots — are required to:

- Establish a voter education program specific to that voting system that notifies each voter of the effect of casting multiple votes for an office.
- Provide voters with instructions on how to correct the ballot before it is cast and counted, including instructions on how to correct errors through the issuance of a replacement ballot if the voter was otherwise unable to change the ballot or correct any error.

Lastly, to comply with HAVA:

- Every voting system must be accessible for individuals with disabilities, including, but not limited to, non-visual accessibility for the blind and visually impaired in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters.
- Every polling place must use at least one direct recording electronic voting system or other voting system equipped for individuals with disabilities.
- Every voting system must provide alternative language accessibility as specified in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), which covers jurisdictions meeting certain criteria regarding non-English speaking voters.

(continued)

State Laws

States frequently pass laws that make it easier or harder to vote. These laws most harm Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), people with disabilities, and voters struggling to make ends meet.

It is important to advocate *for* laws that make it easier to vote and *against* laws that make it more difficult. Both efforts are critical to protecting the vote. In 2021 alone, **19 states passed 33 restrictive laws**, including strict photo ID requirements, outlawing giving food or water to voters waiting in line at polling places, and making it harder for voters to drop off their ballot. These efforts to make it more difficult to vote continue today.

Laws that make it easier to vote:

- Voter registration modernization measures
- Pre-registration laws to register 16 and 17-year-olds to vote
- Laws restoring the right to vote for formerly incarcerated individuals
- Increased funding for elections, including voting machines and polling places
- Laws protecting election workers and volunteers from threats and harassment
- Voter education information available in multiple languages and in ways that are accessible to individuals with disabilities
- Enabling early voting for a set period prior to an election
- Same-day registration at the polls

Laws that make it more difficult to vote:

- Making it more difficult for organizations or individuals to register people to vote
- Purging voters from the voting rolls without adequate safeguards
- Voter ID laws that require individuals to show a specific form of photo ID to cast a ballot
- Laws diminishing secretaries of states' authority over elections or shifting aspects of election administration to highly partisan bodies
- Laws making it easy to challenge and potentially overturn an election without hard evidence