

# Congress Members & Activists Fight Voter Suppression

by Victoria Collier and Ben-Zion Ptashnik

In May, Members of Congress fought back against the Supreme Court's gutting of the "pre-clearance" provisions of the Voting Rights Act (1965) and the coordinated political coup to suppress progressive and liberal voters, especially voters of color. They launched a new Voting Rights Caucus, the first congressional organization devoted to defending electoral democracy. Now 71 Representatives strong, the caucus is made up of members of the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

A main objective of the caucus is to force Congress to take up the Voting Rights Advancement Act (H.R. 2867), that restores gutted provisions of the Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act had been renewed under both the Reagan and Bush administrations with overwhelming bipartisan support. Yet the new GOP majority in Congress has no intention of upholding this essential defense against discrimination.

At the grassroots level, citizens are organizing in profound ways to educate the population and inspire action. A new Voting Rights Alliance (VRA) formed in June to support the Voting Rights Caucus. VRA members from across the country came to DC for a rally and press conference. Speakers included Representatives Sewell and Veasey, Jesse Jackson, Terry O'Neill of the National Organization for Women, Rev. Lennox Yearwood of the Hip Hop Caucus, and Barbara Arnwine, Chair of the Voting Rights Alliance.

Thousands of callers flooded Capitol Hill, demanding the House Speaker and Judiciary Committee Chairs hold hearings on the Voting Rights Act. The VRA also held a Twitter town hall and a Twitter storm using the hashtag #ProtestShelby2016. The social media conversation included thousands of participants helping to launch a national campaign to push for the Voting Rights Advancement Act's remedial legislation to restore voting rights, and to build a

resistance movement to voter suppression.

In addition, the Poll Tax Prohibition Act (H.R. 5557) opposes a slew of new voter ID laws by prohibiting that an individual present ID that has an added cost. Currently, millions of voters in dozens of states face costly demands that force them to chase documents in order to vote.

Many elderly women of color are most affected, since they must prove why the maiden names on their birth certificates do not match their married names. They are also less likely to be able to drive themselves on the chase for newly required documentation.

The VOTE Act (H.R. 5131) and the Election Integrity Act of 2016 (H.R. 6072) introduced by Hank Johnson (D-GA) focus on the security of future elections, calling for transparency of election tabulation through mandating paper ballots and strong audits, and addressing the reliability of aging voting machines, which often wind up in minority districts, breaking down and causing long lines at the polls. Johnson believes that "non-proprietary, open-source software is imperative for next generation voting."

Last year, Virginia decertified 3,000 voting machines after determining that there were severe security problems, including a Wi-Fi feature for tallying votes that allowed someone to alter election results without leaving a trace. These machines had been used in hundreds of elections since 2003. Similar insecure voting systems are in use throughout the country.

Through the Election Integrity Act of 2016 and the VOTE Act, states will apply for federal funds to develop new, transparent "open-source" technology for vote tabulation that can be publicly owned. They also prevent Internet connections on electronic voting machines and call for the elimination of insecure Internet transfer of voting results.

The Election Integrity Act of 2016 also calls for a ban on Direct Voting Electronic (DRE) voting machines. This bill, which is focused on elections security, gained momentum after the hacking and release of the DNC e-mails, followed by the electronic penetration of the Illinois and Arizona election administration systems.

As the Voting Rights Caucus and the Voting Rights Alliance gear up to fight voter suppression and manipulation of elections, organizers are seeking to build broad-based participation in the actions and educational campaigns in the weeks leading up to the elections in November.

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June 23 voting rights press conference; Rep. Veasey, (D-Texas), Rep. Sewell, (D-Alabama) Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rainbow – PUSH, Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Hip Hop Caucus, Barbara Arnwine, chair of the Voting Rights Alliance, Terry O'Neill, National Organization For Women and Rep. Charles Rangel (D-New York).  
Photo: Ben Ptashnik