

NJVRA NOW

February 21, 2023

Dear Governor Murphy, Senate President Scutari and Speaker Coughlin,

We write to urge you to pass a strong version of A4554/S2997, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey (NJVRA). This momentous bill would protect voters of color in New Jersey and strengthen our state democracy as voting rights continue to be eroded on the federal level. Through robust, pro-democracy measures, the NJVRA would reduce barriers to voting, increase language access and assistance, prohibit deceptive practices at the polls, and ensure that communities of color will have their ballots counted. We have provided feedback to the bill sponsor to make this a bill that reflects the needs of New Jersey voters. Together, we believe we can come to an agreement on the language and pass this crucial legislation into law.

The 1965 federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) was landmark legislation – the culmination of decades of organizing and fighting for racial justice in the United States. The VRA sought to enforce the promises of the Fifteenth Amendment and protect voters of color against racial discrimination in voting. At its height, the VRA protected and expanded the right to vote by outlawing literacy tests, challenging poll taxes, making obstruction of voter registration illegal and requiring jurisdictions with previous histories of racial discrimination to obtain “preclearance” from the U.S. Department of Justice or a court before changing any voting practices or procedures. This legislation protected the right to vote for all eligible citizens.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court has steadily weakened those federal voting rights protections. Supreme Court decisions over the past decade have gutted the preclearance requirement and subsequently allowed states and localities to enact discriminatory voting regulations and practices that have contributed to growing voter suppression across the country. They have also made it increasingly difficult for voters to bring action when they experience discrimination at the polls.

New Jersey voters, especially voters of color, already face serious challenges while trying to vote. Late poll openings, long lines, barriers to physical access to polling locations, and lack of language accessibility for those with limited English proficiency, among other obstacles, make voting onerous and difficult. These barriers disproportionately impact Black, Latina/Latino, Asian American and Arab communities, as well as young voters, older voters, voters with disabilities, and voters in impoverished areas of the state. In New Jersey, every qualified citizen has the right to vote – but not everyone has the equal ability to vote. This is unacceptable.

In order to achieve a strong, racially just democracy, New Jersey must step in where the federal VRA has been weakened and deconstruct these barriers while strengthening voting rights protections.

The NJVRA must:

- Establish a New Jersey preclearance program that makes local governments with a history of discrimination prove to the state or to a court in New Jersey that certain changes they make to the voting process will not harm voters of color before those changes can go into effect;
- Provide new legal tools to fight discriminatory voting rules and procedures in court;
- Expand language assistance for voters with limited English proficiency;
- Include strong protections against voter intimidation, deception or obstruction at the polls;
- Instruct state judges to interpret election laws in a pro-voter way whenever possible; and
- Ensure local and state voting laws, procedures and regulations do not deny voters of color and other protected categories of voters the right to cast their vote

Voters, and especially voters of color, in New Jersey deserve a strong state voting rights act that allows them to access the ballot easily. They deserve a state that protects them while they exercise their right to vote.

New Jersey can and must be a national leader in protecting the right to vote. New Jersey needs a state voting rights act, and it needs one now. It is time to pass a strong version of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New Jersey (A4554/S2997).

Sincerely,

AAPJ Montclair

American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey (ACLU-NJ)

Action Together New Jersey (ATNJ)

Black Lives Matter Paterson

BlueWaveNJ

Campaign Legal Center (CLC)

Council on American-Islamic Relations of New Jersey (CAIR-NJ)

Deliver My Vote

Election Law Clinic at Harvard Law School

End Citizens United//Let America Vote Action Fund

Fairshare Housing

FairVote Action

Faith in New Jersey
Garden State Bar Association
Indivisible NWI
Initiate Justice
Latino Action Network Foundation
LatinoJustice
Lawyers for Equal Access to Advocacy & Dignity (LEAAD)
League of Women Voters of NJ (LWVNJ)
Legal Defense Fund (LDF)
Make the Road New Jersey
March for Our Lives New Jersey
Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America
NAACP Gloucester County
NAACP New Brunswick
NAACP NJ State Conference
National Association of Social Workers - NJ Chapter
National Council of Jewish Women Bergen County Section
New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice (NJAIJ)
New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children
New Jersey DemCast
New Jersey Federation of Democratic Women
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (NJISJ)
New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP)
New Jersey Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC-NJ)
Newark Communities for Accountable Policing
Newark Community Street Team
NJ 11th For Change
NJ Citizen Action
Palestinian American Community Center

People's Organization for Progress (POP)
Prisoners Legal Advocacy Network (PLAN)
Reproductive Health Access Project - New Jersey Cluster
Returning Citizens Support Group
Salvation and Social Justice
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund
Social Justice Matters, Inc.
South Jersey NOW Alice Paul Chapter
Stand Up America
Students Demand Action
Unitarian Universalist FaithAction NJ
Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center
Women for Progress
Women of Color Coalition
Working Families Party
YWCA Northern New Jersey

cc: Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Senator Shirley Turner