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Achieving Change Together

June 2022 ClassACTions Newsletter

June is bustin' out all over. Given the events in the news, certainly not quite the way we all would wish. We hope you can find time to do something restorative. If you are looking for a provocative beach or deck read (we know, an oxymoron), may we suggest "The Flag, The Cross and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened," by **Bill McKibben '82**? The author—an eminent environmental journalist—has many of the same concerns that animate ClassACT HR73, including a desire to keep fighting the good fight. Not exactly escapist, we know, but renewing nonetheless.

VOTER SUPPRESSION: A CANCER IN OUR BODY POLITIC



Video created by **Rick Brotman '73**

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With many primaries behind us, we now are scant weeks away from the 2022 midterm elections. Many of us are looking toward November with considerable trepidation, and not only because of societal and economic turbulence. In several crucial precincts, we are worried that the outcomes will be influenced by voter suppression.

Classmates **Marilyn Go**, **Ryan O’Connell** and **Jim Harbison** of ClassACT HR73’s Justice & Civic Engagement group have been studying voter suppression. (Their findings are reported here and in the accompanying video above). To say the least, the situation is dire. Says Ryan, “This is the most serious, well-coordinated attack on voting rights that we have seen since the end of the Civil War. Now, it’s not just Black Americans who are affected but also white urban Americans who live in key battleground states with razor-thin election margins.”

Legislatures in many Republican-dominated states are passing laws in a deliberate drive to make it harder for voters, particularly minorities, to cast their ballots. Since the 2020 election, lawmakers in 19 states have passed 34 laws that restrict voting rights. It is not a coincidence that seven of those states have a long history of suppressing African-Americans’ access to the ballot box. (But among the states in the voter-suppression ranks, notes Ryan, are Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, hardly bastions of the old Confederacy.)

For fifty years, many of these states were among the 15 jurisdictions that were constrained by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. They had to submit any proposed voting laws for review by the Department of Justice. But in 2013, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the U.S. Supreme Court eviscerated Section 5 of the Act, and ended the preclearance requirement. That decision has allowed seven of these states, and others, to pass the current wave of voter suppression laws. Says Jim, “As soon as the Voting Rights Act got gutted, immediately there were legislatures that passed legislation that changed [things]. They were just waiting and—bang!—it happened.”

Matters have only become worse in 2022, as legislators in at least 27 states have introduced, pre-filed, or carried over 250 bills with restrictive provisions. This dramatic increase in the number of harsh voter suppression measures threatens our democracy – it is a cancer in our body politic. (One place you can go to keep up with the suppression standings is the website of the Brennan Center for Justice, [brennancenter.org](https://www.brennancenter.org).)

The stated rationale behind these efforts is that fraud exists that must be eliminated. “There’s virtually no significant fraud in any American election anywhere,” says Ryan. “So this is a solution in search of a problem that doesn’t exist.”

Voter Suppression Techniques

Laws restricting voting rights that have been passed, or have been proposed, seek to disenfranchise voters through several techniques, such as:

- Limiting the use of voting by mail, either outright or by reducing the number of drop boxes. This is a favorite target. Why? Says Ryan, “A lot of Blacks and Latinos have working-class jobs and live in neighborhoods where often the lines are quite long. They don’t have a nice white-collar job where they can step out of the office for a couple of hours. It doesn’t work that way.” So they are perfect candidates for mail-in voting. “Six states use mail-in voting almost exclusively and it works fine,” says Ryan.
- Cutting the number of polling stations in densely populated cities, particularly in minority neighborhoods.
- Reducing the hours when polling stations are open.
- Allowing officials great leeway to purge voting rolls.
- Requiring voter identification or limiting the acceptable forms of voter ID—often a problem for minority voters.
- Preventing groups from providing water bottles to voters standing in long lines in areas with limited polling sites.

In a new twist, several states, such as Georgia, have enacted laws that could allow partisan politicians to interfere in overseeing election results. Under these laws, they have been given the authority to supplant non-partisan state officials, such as secretaries of state, who have traditionally tabulated and certified election results.

Furthermore, several new laws impose criminal penalties—including prison sentences—upon election officials who take innocuous steps such as sending mail-in ballots to voters on their own initiative, rather than in response to a request. These laws are intended to intimidate election officials from performing their duties.

How far will the suppressors go to suppress? Says Jim, “In the 2018 election Florida passed a referendum declaring that convicted felons who had served their time could vote again. But the legislature then passed a law that said first they had to pay back the monetary costs of the crime that put them in the clink to begin with.” (There’s now a bill in the legislature that would overturn the legislature’s work.)

Don’t Count on the Federal Government

Since the 2020 election, Congress has failed twice to pass legislation to

by state, go to: <https://www.commoncause.org/voting-tools/>.

Because of ClassACT HR73's 501c3 non-profit status, we have only listed groups that are non-partisan, though some organizations may be 501c4 entities to which donations are not tax-deductible.

For the lawyers in our class, Ryan particularly recommends the Election Protection Coalition. "It is nonpartisan, excellent," he says. "You do have to be a lawyer. They allow you to call from your office or your house and they advise voters on a real-time basis. I worked for them in 2020 and they're a superb outfit."

There's always good, old-fashioned reaching out. Says Jim, "If absentee ballots need to be in seven days before the election, you can participate in phone banks that help people get their ballots in eight days before. It's marginal, it won't solve the whole thing, but it might make it easier for some people to vote." One at a time, those votes are crucial to democracy.
