

**Preclearing the Way to Vote: A Proponent Testimony for the John Lewis Voting  
Rights Advancement Act**

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## Abstract

To demonstrate how my double majors in social work and political science, I chose to write and present a Congressional testimony of the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. This legislation aims to establish a Section 4 coverage formula for jurisdictions that would be subject to preclearance procedures under the Voting Rights Act after the Supreme Court ruled that the existing formula authorized in 2008 was unconstitutional in *Shelby County v. Holder*. If a jurisdiction, which could consist of a state, county, or township, is determined to be covered by the Section 4 formula, that jurisdiction must receive preclearance, or approval, from the United States Attorney General or a U.S. District of Columbia Court before they change any voting practices. I chose this bill because learning about the *Shelby County v. Holder* case in my political science class is what introduced me to my interest in voting rights. I continued to pursue my interest by taking classes in political science about voting. I then gained the necessary skills to advocate for voting rights through my macro social work classes and my social work field placement, where I practiced voter engagement and advocacy. By writing this testimony, I have the opportunity to apply the knowledge of the history and current practices of voting that I learned in my political science major while practicing the advocacy skills that I gained in my social work major. After the testimony, I then reflect on my experiences in my double-major pathway, what I have learned from them, and how they have prepared me for my future after graduation.

## Testimony

Thank you to the Senate Judiciary Committee for allowing me to submit testimony on the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. I am a fourth-year undergraduate student at the Ohio State University double-majoring in Social Work and Political Science. My combined interests in social justice and public policy led to me select these two majors, but it is these two majors that have led me to discover my passion for voting rights and making the political process accessible. Most notably, I realized my passion for voting rights in my political science class, in which I learned about the *Shelby County v. Holder* Supreme Court Case. The decision famously gutted key protections of the Voting Rights Act. Upon discovering the *Shelby* case, I followed my anger and passion into a field placement with the College of Social Work that allowed me to refine my efforts to advocate for voting rights. Both experiences have brought me to testify today.

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act will provide a formula that will determine which states and jurisdictions are subject to preclearance requirements for any change in voting practices under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. The previous formula, which was provided in Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, was struck down by the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013. Congress should pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act for these three reasons:

- I. Current burdens and current conditions for voters display a need for Section 5 preclearance protections
- II. In the absence of preclearance, litigation and mobilizing efforts have mitigated the effects of harmful voting bills but these efforts can only respond, they cannot prevent harmful laws and practices

III. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act addresses each of the Supreme Court's concerns that caused it to strike down the previous formula

***Shelby County v. Holder (2013)***

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act ensured that states and jurisdictions with a history of discriminatory voting practices could not implement changes to their voting practices without requesting preclearance from either the United States Attorney General or a United States District Court for the District of Columbia. To be granted preclearance, the jurisdiction was required to prove that the change “does not deny or abridge the right to vote on account of race, color, or membership in a language minority group” (“About,” 2020). Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act contained the formula for determining which states and jurisdictions would be subject to Section 5 preclearance. The formula dictated that a state or jurisdiction would become covered by Section 5 if “the state or jurisdiction had, as of November 1, 1964, used a "test or device," restricting the opportunity to register and vote and if less than 50 percent of persons of voting age were registered to vote on November 1, 1964, or that less than 50 percent of persons of voting age voted in the presidential election of 1964” (“About,” 2020). While these provisions were intended to be in effect for only five years, Congress saw it fit to extend Section 5 preclearance and the Section 4(b) formula in 1970, 1975, 1982, and finally, 2006 (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013). At the time of *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013, nine states including Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia were covered as a whole by Section 5. Individual counties in California, Florida, New York, North Carolina, and South Dakota, as well as townships in Michigan, were also identified as covered jurisdictions (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013.)

In *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Supreme Court upheld Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act but declared Section 4(b) unconstitutional because the “current burdens” placed on covered jurisdictions were not justified by the “current conditions,” but the conditions present in 1965 (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013). The Court argued that Congress’s reauthorization of Section 4(b) in 2006 for another 25 years did not adequately account for the improvements made in enfranchising racially minoritized voters (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013). By striking the Section 4(b) formula, however, no jurisdictions can be identified as subjects of Section 5 preclearance. The Court determined that Congress can draft a new formula, so long as it identifies covered jurisdictions based on a formula that reflects current voting discrimination. Congress has yet to do so.

After the landmark decision, formerly covered states quickly began enacting restrictive voting laws. Within one year, seven formerly covered states had enacted laws that had been passed before *Shelby* but blocked by preclearance. Within just 24 hours of the *Shelby* decision, the Texas Attorney General announced that its voter ID law that was rejected by preclearance after being unable to prove that it would not discriminate against Black and Latino voters would be enacted (“The effects,” 2018). Mississippi and Alabama soon followed suit. In the same year, North Carolina and Virginia each passed and enacted new restrictive voting laws (“The effects,” 2018). North Carolina’s law was challenged and struck down by a court after it was passed (“The effects,” 2018).

## **I. Current Burdens, Current Conditions**

Although the current wave of suppressive laws began around the time of the *Shelby* decision, the historic turnout in the 2020 election has dramatically accelerated state legislatures’ attacks on voting. This year, 361 restrictive voting bills have been introduced in 47 state

legislatures (“Voting laws,” 2021). Five have been enacted in Georgia, Arkansas, Iowa, and Utah. 55 bills in 25 states have experienced movement within their respective legislatures (“Voting laws,” 2021). These bills include provisions that:

- Restrict same-day or Election-day registration,
- Enact voter ID requirements,
- Limit early voting days,
- Expand purges of voter rolls, and
- Undermine the power of local election officials (“Voting laws, 2021).

These provisions have been shown to have a discriminatory effect:

- Black voters use early voting at higher rates (Kropf, 2012, p. 3)
- Voters of color are, on average, 7% less likely to have access to a form of voter ID (Barreto et al., 2019), and
- Voters of color at a heightened risk of having their valid registrations incorrectly purged removed (Huber et al., 2021).

The states that have introduced the greatest number of restrictive bills include Texas with 49 bills, Georgia with 25 bills, and Arizona with 23 bills (“Voting laws,” 2021). All three states were covered jurisdictions and subject to Section 5 preclearance before the *Shelby* decision.

Much of the most egregious acts of voter suppression that states and jurisdictions have taken since *Shelby*, however, are often not in the form of legislation. Instead, they manipulate funding practices, move and reduce the number of voting locations, change voting dates or hours, add requirements to the absentee ballot process, and implement other election administration practices intended to confuse and limit Black, brown, and youth voters from

casting their ballots. Each would have been subject to preclearance and likely blocked in covered jurisdictions before the *Shelby* decision.

## **II. Mitigation**

Without a preclearance mechanism, voters and organizations must turn to litigation to oppose discriminatory and restrictive laws. Most of these lawsuits are now tried under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits voting practices that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership of a language minority group (“About,” 2020). In Section 2 trials, the burden of proof falls on the plaintiff. This means that voters and organizations must prove that the law has had or will have a discriminatory effect. By contrast, preclearance trials under Section 5 placed the burden of proof on states or jurisdictions. They had to prove that the voting changes they would enact would not be discriminatory. This shift makes opposing legislation through the courts costly, time-consuming, and difficult for voters and organizations. In effect, it also makes it easier and less costly for jurisdictions to implement restrictive voting changes.

If even a fraction of the 361 introduced restrictive bills in state legislatures are passed, organizations will not have the ability to adequately use the courts to oppose each one. In 1966, the Court upheld the Voting Rights Act after its first constitutional challenge because individual litigation against discriminatory voting practices was not sufficient to combat the “blight of racial discrimination in voting” that “infected every part of the process.” Without Section 5 preclearance, we will retrogress to a position where litigation is again not sufficient to address the discriminatory voting changes that are flooding the country.

In the absence of meaningful legal protections and effective litigation, the burden of advancing and promoting access for voters falls on community organizers who must respond to

voting restrictions to help voters continue to turn out. When states pass restrictive laws, community mobilizers step in to prevent turnout from dropping, often negating the “disenfranchising effects” of the laws (Valentino & Neuner, 2017).

This year, I became one of those responding organizers through my social work field placement. I went out into the community to register voters and check that their registration was not purged from voter rolls. I contacted voters to educate them about the registration deadline and early voting periods. When voters needed to turn to absentee ballots to safely vote during the COVID pandemic, I helped call and text voters to answer questions they had about the process and to ensure that they sent the ballot in time for it to arrive by election day. When changes to the postal service caused people to need to cast a vote early in person or drop off their absentee ballot at a drop-box, I contacted voters to let them know that it was necessary to do so and to tell them how. When voters could not access voting early in person or dropping their ballot in a drop-box because there was only one location in their county, I drove voters to the early voting center so they could cast their early ballots. I educated voters about what ID they needed to bring to their polling location to be allowed to vote, then worked to make sure they had access to an acceptable form of ID. I was happy to have the opportunity to help voters exercise their right to vote through these many efforts. Yet, these efforts are time-consuming and costly to organizers.

While organizers are effective at mitigating the costs of restrictive voting laws, the health of our democracy should not rely on them. Instead, our democracy should be safeguarded by laws and protections that uphold citizens’ access to voting. The Voting Rights Act was monumental in implementing these safeguards, but upon Congress’ failure to reenact a formula for Section 5 after *Shelby County v. Holder*, the United States’ democracy is again vulnerable to attacks on equitable access to voting.



### **III. Fulfilling the Court's Standards**

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act will fulfill the Court's mandate to create a new formula that will restore the Voting Rights Act's preclearance mechanism in Section 5. The new formula will be based on a finding of repeated voting rights violations in the past 25-years ("John Lewis," 2020). The 25-year period will roll. This means that the period will continuously move each year to ensure that the formula keeps up with current conditions of states who commit discriminatory violations, as demanded by the Supreme Court. The bill also provides a way for states to come out of coverage after 10 years if they successfully maintain a violation-free record, addressing the Court's concerns on the prolonged burdens to states ("John Lewis," 2020). It establishes a process for reviewing changes that focuses on practices such as implementing voter ID laws or the reduction of bilingual voting materials, which have historically been used to discriminate against voters ("John Lewis," 2020). It provides other legal protections for voters who are under the threat of a discriminatory voting measure and increases accessibility and protections for Native American and Alaska Native voters ("John Lewis," 2020). The act tailors the Voting Rights Act to address the evolution of suppression in the United States. Not only does this targeted approach meet the "current conditions" standard for a formula set by *Shelby County v. Holder*, but it also maximizes the effectiveness of the Voting Rights Act's protections for today's voters.

#### **The case for the John Lewis Voting Rights Act**

As I have shown, current burdens and current conditions show a sufficient need for Section 5 preclearance mechanisms to be reinstated. Voter suppression is rampant in the United States and efforts by state legislators threaten to worsen conditions without federal intervention. Organizers and litigation can help mitigate some of the effects of suppression but are not

equipped to fully prevent them. Finally, I have shown that the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, which will provide the needed formula for Section 5 to be in use again, fulfills the court's concerns that caused them to strike down the previous formula.

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act will block suppression from its source. The preclearance mechanism established by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act is essential for protecting voters, especially Black voters, voters of color, and youth voters, from having their vote suppressed by restrictive and confusing changes to voting by their states and local governments. Yet, without a formula to trigger the coverage of jurisdictions, voters are left vulnerable to these changes. In the wake of a landslide of bills being introduced across the country, it is now more urgent than it has ever been since the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision to enact a formula that will make Section 5 and the preclearance mechanism function again. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act provides this formula.

Members, the time to act is now. This act has been introduced before but has failed to pass both the House and Senate. I urge you to restore the full protections offered by the Voting Rights Act for today's voters by re-introducing and passing the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress.

## **Reflections**

### **Deciding to major in social work and political science**

When I started as a freshman at Ohio State, I was an exploration major. I decided I was interested in policy but did not know which major I wanted to declare to pursue it. During my senior year of high school, I completed an internship with a social worker in an agency that did case management for homeless families. After the internship, which was micro-focused, I

decided that social work was not the right fit for me, so I ruled out the social work major immediately. Yet, as I was sitting in Stillman before one of my math lectures, I read the highlights of alumni from the College of Social Work. Many of the alumni were in macro-focused careers. Before this experience, I did not realize that there were opportunities in social work to have careers in policy, advocacy, and macro-focused work. As I learned more about social work and the values that lay its foundation, I decided that social work provided the best fit and the best lens for me to practice policy and advocacy from.

Because social work does operate on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, the social work major curriculum includes classes that examine social work practice from all three levels. Yet, many of the classes are focused on micro-level skills. As I navigated through the major with the intent to pursue macro-level policy work, I found that I would benefit from supplementing my education with another discipline that concentrates on policy, politics, and the change process. I again began exploring majors and decided that political science would provide me the theoretical and institutional knowledge behind policy decision-making. I chose to specialize in political leadership and reform so that I could gain the knowledge necessary to be effective as a catalyst for policy change.

### **Social work and political science as interdisciplinary complements**

As a Student Ambassador, I have attended sessions for incoming freshman and first-year exploration students that serve to introduce the social work major and provide information on it. During these sessions, I have heard people compare psychology and social work, with the difference being that social work offers a more whole look at the person and their environment while also focusing on practice and skills rather than theory alone. The connection between political science and social work functions similarly. While political science concentrates on the

institutions, environment, and policy that affect individuals, social work focuses on the individual, their outside conditions, and how they interact. While political science offers a more theoretical understanding, social work provides both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. By majoring in both disciplines, therefore, I gain both the big-picture, theoretical knowledge of policy practice and the micro, real skills to engage in it. I apply the knowledge I acquire through my political science curriculum to the practice opportunities I am provided through my social work major. Conversely, the real-world experiences I have through my social work field placement inform my understanding of political science concepts. The two have continuously interacted as I have worked through my undergraduate courses, participated in internship opportunities, and completed my social work field placement.

### **Notable experiences**

Five key experiences stand out to me during my time in my double major that have exemplified the connection between the social work and political science disciplines and have solidified my passion for policy and advocacy.

The first experience I want to highlight is my social work honors project, for which I have written testimony on the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. This project was first informed by a class I took for political science, “Law and Politics,” in which I learned about the Voting Rights Act, the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, and the consequences of the absence of Section 5 preclearance mechanisms. The project also builds on my field placement, where I gained first-hand experience in mitigating voter suppression through voter registration, engagement, and mobilization. The evidence that supports my claims in the testimony, furthermore, comes directly from my political science curriculum. Finally, the project is an application of the advocacy skills that I have learned in my social work field placement as well

as my macro-level social work classes. The entire project has been a marriage between the skills, knowledge, and experiences I have gained in my two majors.

The second notable experience comes from when I participated in an internship in the Ohio House of Representatives during my junior year. The opportunity for me to have the internship was directly due to my double major. The Legislative Aid who hired me was looking for an intern that had both political knowledge and the skills necessary for working with constituents. During our interview, he told me that I stood out because of my social work background, which uniquely prepared me for helping with constituent matters. Therefore, my internship was filled with opportunities to practice my policy knowledge that I gained in political science along with opportunities to practice the micro-level skills I gained in my social work classes.

The final three experiences I want to highlight result from my social work field placement, which I completed in the College of Social Work's Office of Community Engagement under the supervision of the Advocacy Director. My placement focused on voter engagement, promoting democracy, and community organizing, and advocacy. For my political science major, I chose to take a class called "Political Participation and Voting Behavior." This class examines why people vote, how they vote, and how changing voting practices and laws affect turnout. The class heavily relies on political science research studies to explain voters, their preferences, and their behaviors. Because I worked directly with voters and helping them turn out to vote in my placement, I supplemented the theoretical, academic knowledge from the class with real-world experiences. My experiences helped me to better understand the content of the class. I also used them to push back in discussions about using restrictive voting laws and ideas that suggest that increased access to voting may not be worth the effects they have on

turnout. The knowledge I gained about individual voters and how voting laws affect them influenced how I navigated my class and how I understood the laws and practices we discussed.

Next, after the attempted insurrection that took place on January 6, 2021, my field supervisor wanted to use his position in the college to start conversations about misinformation, social media, and the health of our democracy. As we started to build conversations and an event, I heavily relied on my political science education to inform the discussions we had and to give context to the problem we were trying to address. Specifically, I took two classes on modern democracy, from which I pulled information, studies, and readings. I also contacted my professors from my political science classes, who helped us to understand the bigger picture of misinformation, its contributors, its effects, and potential solutions. My political science education informed how we saw the problem and therefore how we engaged it and developed an intervention. Once again, this experience displayed how I combined the theoretical knowledge I had from political science with the practical intervention skills I practiced in social work.

Finally, I attended the College of Social Work's 2021 Virtual D.C. Advocacy Immersion in the spring of my senior year. The experience came as a part of my field placement because my office and supervisor were the architects of the event. The experience consisted of three advocacy training sessions and a three-day virtual event in which students networked with alumni who work in policy, met with the offices of Ohio's Congressional members to advocate for a bill, and attend Congressional Committee Hearings. By participating, I realized the various strengths I have gained in my social work and political science education and how I can apply them to advocacy practice. Specifically, I applied my knowledge of lawmakers and the incentives that drive their decisions, which I learned in political science, to craft a proposal for each member that we met with to maximize the effectiveness of our message. I also practiced the

interpersonal and relationship-building skills I gained from social work, which helped my team connect with the staff we met with quickly. The connection we built helped us better engage the staff members we met with. Finally, the knowledge and experiences I acquired in my two majors helped me be flexible, be prepared, and interpret the meetings we were in so that I could adapt to the environment or conversation. Each skill allowed my team to be effective advocates for our bills to offices in both political parties. Without the combined skills I had from my social work and political science majors, the advocacy experience would not have been as impactful or successful. This highlighted not only the expertise that I have gained from my majors but also the ways that my majors have worked together to effectively prepare me for a career in advocacy.

### **How my double major has prepared me for my future**

Each of the skills, pieces of knowledge, and experiences that I have benefitted from as a result of my double major in social work and political science have set me up for a successful career in policy and advocacy work. My political science major has laid the foundation for me to understand how the policy process works, the incentives that decision-makers have to pursue and pass policy, and the consequences of policy on aggregate levels. My social work major has offered me the micro-level, interpersonal, and community-building skills that are necessary for being successful as a policy advocate. It has shown me the consequences that policy has on individuals and what should be changed in policy to improve outcomes for people.

Consequently, my social work major lent me the passion to pursue meaningful change. Finally, my social work major has offered me myriad experiences to practice what I have learned in my political science and social work classes, as well as access a network that will open up career opportunities for me in the future.

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## Appendix

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

## John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act

H.R. 4/S. 4263 in the 116th Congress

Sponsor: Rep. Terri Sewell (D-AL)/Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT)

**The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act will restore the Voting Rights Act to protect citizens in covered jurisdictions from unjust, discriminatory changes in voting practices.<sup>1</sup>**

The Voting Rights Act, first enacted in 1965, is heralded as one of the most effective pieces of legislation in United States History.

In 2013, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Shelby County v. Holder* that Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional after Congress reauthorized it in 2006<sup>2</sup>.

Section 4(b) provided the formula for identifying which states and jurisdictions would be subject to Section 5 preclearance requirements when instituting changes in its voting practices<sup>3</sup>.

Without the Section 4(b), no state nor jurisdiction can be covered under Section 5, nullifying one of the key voter protection mechanisms of the Voting Rights Act.

The Court ruled in *Shelby* that Congress can enact new formula if it "speaks to current conditions."<sup>4</sup> Yet, since the ruling in 2013, Congress has still not passed a new formula to trigger Section 5 coverage.



## WHAT THIS BILL WILL DO

**The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act:**

- Creates a new coverage formula based on a finding of repeated voting rights violations in the past 25-years
  - the 25-year period "rolls," or continuously moves, to keep up with "current conditions," so that only states that have a recent record of racial discrimination in voting are covered
- States are covered for 10 years then, after establishing a clean record, can come out of coverage
- Establishes a process for reviewing changes that focuses on practices such as implementing voter ID laws or the reduction of bilingual voting materials, which have historically been used to discriminate against voters
- Provides other legal protections for voters who are under the threat of a discriminating voting measure
- Increases accessibility and protections for Native American and Alaska Native voters.



States With Existing Restrictive Bills

Image from Brennan Center for Justice<sup>5</sup>

## WHY IT MATTERS TO YOUR CONSTITUENTS

## In previously covered jurisdictions:

- Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama each enacted photo ID laws that had been rejected by federal preclearance<sup>6</sup>
- North Carolina passed a bill restricting voting access<sup>7</sup>
  - Struck down under Voting Rights Act Section 2 Violation

## In the past year:

- Following the 2020 Presidential election, legislators have introduced 361 bills with restrictive provisions in 47 states<sup>8</sup>
  - 6 have been enacted
  - 55 have had at least one committee action
  - Texas has introduced 48 bills, Georgia 25 bills, and Arizona 23 bills
- Modern restrictive laws aim to restrict same-day or Election-day registration, enact voter ID requirements, limit early voting days, and expand purges of voter rolls<sup>9</sup>

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

To protect voters from impending discriminatory voting restrictions, it is urgent Congress re-introduce and pass the John Lewis Voting Advancement Act in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress.



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