

House passes bill to restore key parts of Voting Rights Act

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.12.20

Word Count 870

Level 1190L



Civil rights leader Representative John Lewis, Democrat of Georgia, is hugged before House Democrats passed the Voting Rights Advancement Act to eliminate state and local voter suppression laws at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on December 6, 2019. At right is Representative Terri Sewell, Democrat of Alabama, who introduced the bill and who represents Selma, Alabama, a city that was at the forefront of the 1960s civil rights movement. On the far right is Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont. Photo: J. Scott Applewhite/AP Photo tk

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives approved a bill on December 6, 2019. The bill would restore key sections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a law that was created to reduce the obstacles black people faced when voting. The Voting Rights Act once required officials in all or parts of 15 states to receive federal approval before making changes to the voting process. Most of these states are in the South.

In 2013, a case called *Shelby v. Holder* was brought to the Supreme Court. In the case, the Court decided to toss out the "pre-clearance" portion of the Voting Rights Act. Pre-clearance allowed the federal government to decide which areas of the country needed federal approval to change their election processes.

New Requirements For Pre-Clearance

The new bill would amend the 1965 law, allowing the federal government to make new requirements for deciding which state and local governments need pre-clearance. Those governments would need approval by the federal government before changing their voting processes.

After the bill was approved by a vote of 228 to 187, Democratic Representative John Lewis of Georgia announced the results to the House. Lewis is an icon of the civil rights movement, so the fact that he made the announcement reflected how important the new bill is for Democrats.

Though Democratic leaders in the House have voted for the new law, only one Republican, Representative Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, joined Democrats in voting for the bill. The bill must now be approved in the Senate, where it is unlikely to move forward because the majority of senators are currently Republicans.

Lewis and other supporters said the measure would help prevent voter suppression in the South and other areas. Voter suppression refers to strategies used to prevent or discourage a person or group of people from voting. People might do this to influence the outcome of an election. The new law would require states and cities with a recent history of violating voting rights to have any changes to their election processes approved by the U.S. Justice Department.

Overseeing Elections In Places With History Of Discrimination

In 2018, many Georgia voters faced strict requirements when registering to vote, confusion at polling places and other obstacles. Supporters of the law say this is proof that the federal government needs to continue overseeing elections in places with a history of discrimination. Problems were also reported in Florida. Election officials were criticized for the way they handled a legally required recount in close races for governor and U.S. Senate.

"No right is more precious to our citizenship than the right of all Americans to be able to vote," said Democratic Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama, the bill's primary sponsor. "When Americans are not able to cast their ballots, their votes are silenced," she said. Sewell added that elected officials should be concerned if there is any American who wants to vote but is unable to.

The White House does not support the bill. The bill would give the federal government "too much authority over an even greater number of voting practices and decisions made by states and local governments," the White House said in a statement. In addition, the White House believes there has been no justification for why these new laws are necessary.

The White House argued that the Supreme Court has already ruled in the past that similar restrictions imposed by Congress on state governments are unconstitutional.

Real Issue Was Voter Suppression, Not Fraud

Sewell said the 2013 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby v. Holder* has led to increased discrimination against minority voters in her state and throughout the South. Many of these laws were passed in states that generally support Republicans. Some of the laws were passed with the goal of combating voter fraud. However, Sewell said the real issue was voter suppression, not fraud.

The laws were aimed at "suppressing the voice of certain Americans, and that's un-American," Sewell said on the House floor. Whether African Americans in Georgia or Native Americans in

North Dakota, members of minority groups have continually faced barriers to voting, she said. Sewell added that the new bill would make sure everyone has the right to vote and that Republicans and Democrats "should be making sure it's easier to vote, not harder to vote."

Republican Representative Rodney Davis of Illinois said he agreed with Sewell. He believes every eligible American who wants to vote should be able to vote. He called the Voting Rights Act "a great example of a bipartisan solution that is working today to protect Americans from voter discrimination."

Taking Power Away From States

However, Davis does not support Sewell's bill because he believes the bill would do more than bring back the voting rights law. It would require the federal government to approve every election law in the country, which would take that power away from states.

Democrats approved four bills addressing voting rights or election security since gaining majority control of the house in 2019. Davis says that all of these laws have been about involving the federal government in more elections. The bill approved on December 6, "is simply more of the same," Davis said.

Quiz

1 Read the following statement.

Members of the House of Representatives voted along party lines to pass the new bill that amended the Voting Rights Act.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

- (A) Lewis is an icon of the civil rights movement, so the fact that he made the announcement reflected how important the new bill is for Democrats.
- (B) Though Democratic leaders in the House have voted for the new law, only one Republican, Representative Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, joined Democrats in voting for the bill.
- (C) The bill must now be approved in the Senate, where it is unlikely to move forward because the majority of senators are currently Republicans.
- (D) Lewis and other supporters said the measure would help prevent voter suppression in the South and other areas.

2 Read the following paragraph from the section "New Requirements For Pre-Clearance."

Lewis and other supporters said the measure would help prevent voter suppression in the South and other areas. Voter suppression refers to strategies used to prevent or discourage a person or group of people from voting. People might do this to influence the outcome of an election. The new law would require states and cities with a recent history of violating voting rights to have any changes to their election processes approved by the U.S. Justice Department.

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

- (A) The U.S. Justice Department will assume control of elections in Southern states if the law is passed.
- (B) Only states and cities that have demonstrated violations will be required to follow the pre-clearance process.
- (C) Voter suppression continues to be a widespread problem in the South.
- (D) Voter suppression typically happens in states where Republicans are in power.

3 Which of the following sentences from the section "Overseeing Elections In Places With History Of Discrimination" BEST develops a central idea of the article?

- (A) Supporters of the law say this is proof that the federal government needs to continue overseeing elections in places with a history of discrimination.
- (B) "No right is more precious to our citizenship than the right of all Americans to be able to vote," said Democratic Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama, the bill's primary sponsor.
- (C) "When Americans are not able to cast their ballots, their votes are silenced," she said.
- (D) Sewell added that elected officials should be concerned if there is any American who wants to vote but is unable to.

The bill to amend the Voting Rights Act will give the federal government more power.

Which two details BEST support the central idea above?

1. *Those governments would need approval by the federal government before changing their voting processes.*
2. *Lewis and other supporters said the measure would help prevent voter suppression in the South and other areas.*
3. *The new law would require states and cities with a recent history of violating voting rights to have any changes to their election processes approved by the U.S. Justice Department.*
4. *Supporters of the law say this is proof that the federal government needs to continue overseeing elections in places with a history of discrimination.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4