



VOTER ENGAGEMENT POLICY AGENDA

Why Voter Engagement

The right to vote is essential for a well-functioning democracy; however, the United States has a long history of denying this right to all citizens, particularly Black citizens. Although the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment gave citizens the right to vote regardless of race, existing social structures and the passage of Jim Crow laws created barriers to voting for Black men and women. State legislatures passed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other measures to disenfranchise Black voters, who also faced outright intimidation, injury, and death for attempting to vote. Those who managed to vote often had their votes “misplaced,” destroyed, or “disqualified.” The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed to prevent racially targeted voter suppression. The Act placed constraints on Alabama and other southern states and required federal oversight of their voting procedures. It also prevented the gerrymandering of electoral districts to dilute the voting power of minority communities.

Today we face a new assault on the freedom to vote. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down key sections of the Voting Rights Act and states immediately began to pass new restrictions on voting and aggressively removing individuals from voting rolls. In the wake of record high turnout among Black and minority voters in the 2020 election, legislative efforts to restrict the freedom to vote have intensified.

Our Voter Engagement Mission

AISJ works to achieve meaningful and sustainable systems change that increases voter participation, engagement, and protection in order to strengthen and defend our democracy.

Through the advancement of a bold organizational policy agenda rooted in racial equity and social justice, we seek to go beyond adjustments to the status quo and drive transformational change in public policy, organizational culture, and the public narrative within government, businesses, and our communities.

AISJ engages in advocacy to protect the freedom to vote and remove barriers for participation at the ballot box, particularly among minority, low-income, and other marginalized communities. Our work varies by issue but always centers five core policy goals: Intentionality, Integrity, Inclusion, Investment, and Impact.

Voter Engagement Policy Agenda

- **Reduce Barriers to Voting** – Increase eligible voters’ ability to access the ballot box through proven safe and effective measures including automatic and same-day voter registration, no-excuse vote by mail, early voting, curbside voting, and protections against voter purging and intimidation.
- **Non-Partisan Redistricting** – Create a non-partisan redistricting process, independent of the legislature, that maximizes citizen participation and adheres to legally set criteria such as contiguity, consistency, compactness, communities of interest, and equitable electoral opportunity for minorities.
- **Register, Educate, and Engage Voters** – Expand the number of eligible voters who participate in our democracy and believe in the power of their vote through voter registration drives, educational programs, and community engagement actions.



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Reduce Barriers to Voting

Alabama Institute for Social Justice works to protect Alabamian's fundamental right to vote and participate in our democracy by advocating for proven safe and effective measures that increase access to the ballot box and the removal of obstacles to voting rooted in a legacy of racial discrimination and voter intimidation.

The Problem

Alabama has a long history of voter suppression rooted in efforts to establish and maintain white supremacy. During the Jim Crow era, Alabama embedded numerous discriminatory requirements into the state constitution including a poll tax, literacy test, and property ownership requirements, all of which were intended to disenfranchise Black and poor white voters.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which required the state to seek federal preclearance before any voting laws and rules could be made, was credited with blocking Alabama from passing more than 100 proposed changes to voting laws or rules that the Justice Department concluded were discriminatory against people of color.

But in 2013, The U.S. Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder*, ending federal preclearance requirements. The impact was immediate as state and local governments began to implement barriers to voting that disproportionately impacted Black and other minority voters.

In a 2020 report on barriers to voting, the Alabama State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights identified numerous voting regulations instituted by the state of Alabama since the Supreme Court decision which imposed often insurmountable barriers for Alabama's poor and minority populations as they seek to exercise their right to vote.

One of the first changes Alabama made to its voting laws post-*Shelby* was to institute one of the most restrictive voter identification requirements in the country. The state has also undertaken a significant purge of its voter rolls. An estimated 658,000 voters have been removed from voter rolls since 2015, with 340,000 voters being removed in 2017 alone¹.

The state has closed more than 70 polling places since 2013². As one of only 11 states that do not offer early voting and with strict limitations on absentee voting eligibility, many voters must now travel long distances to increasingly busy polling places, standing in long lines to vote during limited hours on a single day. These obstacles are especially challenging for those with child care obligations, working multiple jobs, or without access to reliable or accessible public transportation.

During the 2021 legislative session the Alabama State Legislature passed a ban on curbside voting, preventing those with disabilities from receiving reasonable accommodation to access their right to vote.



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The Solution

Alabama voters have historically faced numerous challenges and obstacles to voting, with Black, other minority, and poor voters disproportionately targeted and impacted by these restrictions. Additional barriers to voting have only increased since the Supreme Court struck down the requirement for federal preclearance of changes to voting laws and regulations. Removing voting obstacles and improving accessibility are critical to ensuring Alabamian's right to vote as the foundation of American democracy.

Reducing Barriers to Voting will:

- Increase public participation in our democracy, better ensuring that our government representatives and policies reflect the values and priorities of all Alabamians.
- Remove obstacles to voting that disproportionately affect Black and minority voters and their communities.
- Ensure that registering to vote and the act of voting are simple and easy for all eligible citizens.

How We Get There

- Remove barriers to registration for voters by implementing automatic and same-day voter registration.
- Establish a period of multi-day in-person early voting, including weekend availability and permit any registered voter to vote by absentee ballot in any election in which they are qualified to vote.
- Simplify voter identification requirements to ensure equitable access to required documents, removing the photo requirement, and increasing types of acceptable identification.
- Implement protections against voter purging and intimidation and increase voter education regarding voting rights.



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Non-Partisan Redistricting

Alabama Institute for Social Justice supports equitable and transparent apportionment of electoral districts in Alabama through redistricting reform, the end of gerrymandering, and the creation of fair voting maps that allow voters to pick their representatives rather than allowing politicians to select their voters.

The Problem

Every ten years, following the decennial census, each state undertakes the process of redistricting, reapportioning the population and redrawing both congressional and state legislative district lines. In Alabama these state legislative and congressional district lines are drawn by the Legislature. The Governor may veto the legislature's redistricting plan, the legislature can override the veto with a simple majority vote in each chamber.

Because the redistricting process is controlled by incumbent politicians, these legislators are incentivized to redraw the lines so that they retain their power and further their political goals through a process known as gerrymandering.

Two main gerrymandering strategies are "cracking," where a political interest group's supporters are spread across many districts, thus diluting their voting power, and "packing," where a political interest group's supporters are concentrated in one district to reduce their voting power in other districts. In addition to being used for purely partisan purposes, cracking and packing have often used to racially gerrymander, preventing Black and other minority citizens from electing their candidate of choice.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 required that Alabama, among other southern states, receive federal approval before implementing new redistricting maps. For nearly fifty years this preclearance served as a powerful tool to combat racial gerrymandering intended to limit the voting power of Blacks and other minorities. However, in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, including the requirement that Alabama's redistricting maps receive federal approval.

As recently as 2017, a federal district court found that state legislators had unjustifiably used race as the "dominant or controlling" consideration in redrawing state legislative districts.



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The Solution

When politicians control the redistricting process, they are able to use it as a means to further their own political goals. In Alabama this process has resulted in a long legacy of racially discriminatory redistricting. We must create a non-partisan redistricting process, independent of the legislature, that maximizes citizen participation and adheres to legally set criteria such as contiguity, consistency, compactness, communities of interest, and equitable electoral opportunity for minorities.

Non-Partisan Redistricting will:

- Allow voters to pick their representatives instead of politicians selecting their voters.
- Prevent the manipulation of legislative districts by either political party for partisan purposes.
- Increase the likelihood of truly competitive districts, where candidates must gain support from a broad range of voters, rather than pander to a single political faction.
- Prevent the manipulation of electoral districts for discriminatory purposes intended to prevent or limit the participation, influence, or votes of Black, Brown, and other minority voters.

How We Get There

- Create an independent, non-partisan redistricting commission to draw both state and Congressional districts with provisions to prevent manipulation for partisan or discriminatory purposes.
- Establish legal criteria for redistricting including banning partisan gerrymandering and ensuring equitable electoral opportunity for minorities.
- Require transparency throughout the redistricting process, ensuring public access to all meetings as well as opportunities for public input, review of proposed maps, and feedback throughout the process.
- Enact federal legislation reinstating preclearance approval of redistricting maps in jurisdictions with pervasive and persistent discrimination.



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Register, Educate and Engage Voters

Alabama Institute for Social Justice works to expand the number of eligible voters who participate in our democracy and believe in the power of their vote by investing in and engaging with local communities to counteract generations of voter suppression efforts that still continue today.

The Problem

Voter engagement and participation in Alabama is decreasing. Only 63 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in the 2020 general election compared to almost 67 percent in 2016 and an average of 73 percent in the previous three general elections from 2004-2012. Participation in midterm elections, without a presidential contest on the ballot is even poorer, with only 50% of voters in participating in 2018 and a just under 40% voter participation in 2014.

Meanwhile, only 68 percent of the adult population in Alabama was registered to vote in the 2020 election, with 71% of white adults and less than 61 percent of Black adults registered. While the percentage of white adults registered has seen a small percentage increase since 2016, the number of black adults registered to vote has decreased by more than 12 percent.¹

When it comes to voting, the difference between white and Black registered voters is equally stark. Only 57 percent of registered Black voters cast a ballot in the 2020 election, compared to 65.6 percent of registered white voters.

There are many reasons for this lack of voter engagement, including the belief that voting – or the casting of a single ballot – doesn't matter, general disillusionment with the government or electoral system, difficulties in registering or actually casting a ballot, a lack of knowledge about or enthusiasm for the candidates, and the feeling that candidates are not talking about what matters to voters and their communities. For Blacks and other minorities, the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and present-day voter suppression and intimidation also play a key role in low voter registration and electoral participation.

¹ <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/voting-and-voter-registration-as-a-share-of-the-voter-population-by-raceethnicity/>



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The Solution

Voter engagement is essential for a well-functioning democracy, yet participation rates across demographics remain low and historically disenfranchised communities continue to encounter voter suppression. We must expand the number of eligible voters who participate in our democracy and build electoral power among disadvantaged communities through voter registration efforts, educational programs, and community engagement actions.

Registering, Educating and Engaging Voters will:

- Increase voter turnout and participation among minorities and other underrepresented groups.
- Increase knowledge surrounding voting laws and confidence in the power of their vote among historically suppressed communities.
- Increase grassroots community participation in advocacy to advance voting rights and expand voter access.