

Statement of Congressman John Lewis  
November 14, 2011  
Voter Suppression Hearing

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this very important hearing today. I am disappointed that the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee declined to hold this hearing, but I am proud of my colleagues, who know the importance of this issue to each and every American voter in our nation. The right to vote is preservative of all other rights that we hold dear.

We are here today because voting rights are under attack once again in America. Quietly, gradually, state-by-state, the rights of citizens to vote – a right that many people died for – is being taken away.

The Brennan Center released a report that shows that voting law changes, in states across the country, will make it much harder for more than 5 million voters to exercise their constitutional right to vote. In 2010 this is a shame and a disgrace. It is unjust and it is un-American. Today, we should be making it easy, simple, and convenient to vote. Instead, we are creating barriers and making it more difficult for citizens to vote. There is not just one law, but many types of laws that are disenfranchising millions of voters:

- Voter ID laws,
- proof of citizenship laws,
- barriers to registration,
- elimination of early and absentee voting,
- making it harder to restore voting rights for people who have paid their debt to society.

These laws are a barrier to an inclusive democracy. We continue to step backward toward another dark time in our history.

We cannot separate the dangerous trend across this nation from our history and the struggle for the right to vote. Before the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, not so very long ago, it was almost impossible for some citizens to register and vote. Many were harassed, jailed, beaten, and some were even killed for trying to participate in the democratic process.

In the 1960s, people stood in immovable lines to try and register to vote. People waited day after day, only to be turned away and told that voters were not being registered on that day.

The same thing is happening today. States are passing laws to restrict voter registration and are doing away with same-day voter registration. There is no reason that we cannot make it

easy and convenient for people to register to vote. Ten years ago, the Carter-Ford National Task Force on Election Reform called the United States' registration laws "among the world's most demanding" and blamed those registration laws for low voter turnout.

Because of registration problems, 3 million American citizens tried to vote in the 2008 Presidential election, but could not. And with these new laws restricting voter registration, problems will only get worse.

One of the most dangerous voting changes is the new Voter ID requirements, which are disenfranchising millions of American voters. Approximately 11 percent of voting-age citizens in the country—or more than 20 million individuals—do not have a government-issued photo identification.

Today, too many states require a photo ID in order to vote. Each and every voter ID law is a real threat to voting rights in America. Make no mistake these voter ID laws are a poll tax. In an economy where people are already struggling to pay for the most basic necessities that too many citizens will be unable to afford the fees and transportation costs involved in getting a government-issued photo ID.

On the surface, these laws may seem harmless. To those of us who carry photo identification every day, it may seem like no problem to show a photo ID. However, for the elderly who no longer drive, for students, or for a women newly married who has changed her name, this is an unnecessary burden. For those voters, this unnecessary requirement is not harmless; it can deprive them of their constitutional right to vote.

These measures target the elderly, young voters, students, minorities, and low-income voters and prevent them from voting. Despite all of the new voter ID laws across the country, there is no convincing evidence – no evidence at all - that voter fraud is a problem in our election process.

The right to vote is precious and almost sacred, and one of the most important blessings of our democracy. Today we must be vigilant in protecting that blessing. The history of the right to vote in America is a history of conflict, of struggling for the right to vote. Many people died trying to protect that right. I was beaten, and jailed because I stood up for it. For millions like me, the struggle for the right to vote is not mere history; it is experience. We should not take a

step backward with new poll taxes and voter ID laws and barriers to voter registration and voter participation. We must ensure every vote and every voter counts.

The vote is the most powerful, non-violent tool we have in a democratic society. If we allow our power to vote to be taken away, we will be facing the need for a new movement and a new non-violent revolution in America to retake the same ground we won 50 years ago. We must fight back. We must never go back. We must never give up, we must never give in.

We will not stand idly by, while millions of Americans are denied their right to participate in the democratic process. Thank you for holding this hearing today. I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses and I hope that our colleagues will open their eyes to the great injustice that is happening around this nation.