



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Zellnor Myrie

## ON MARTIN LUTHER KING WEEKEND, SENATOR ZELLNOR Y. MYRIE INTRODUCES NEW YORK VOTING RIGHTS ACT

ZELLNOR MYRIE January 21, 2020

| ISSUE: **VOTING RIGHTS**

BROOKLYN, NY — State Senator Zellnor Y. Myrie announced major legislation that will strengthen and protect voting rights in New York.

The New York Voting Rights Act (NYVRA) provides comprehensive and detailed regulations and rights of action that will fulfill for New Yorkers the original promise of the federal Voting Rights Act while adding new protections to ensure that all eligible voters have the ability to participate in the political process.

“More than fifty years after the death of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we face many of the same challenges that he did. Our schools are segregated. Our children are underfed. Our people are unhoused. Worst of all, we face attacks to the very victories Dr. King fought for...and ultimately died for,” **said Senator Zellnor Y. Myrie.**

“In 1965, Martin Luther King stood in the White House as the President signed the federal Voting Rights Act. But in 2020, the rights enshrined in that law are under attack not only across the country but right here in New York. The New York Voting Rights Act will remove barriers between minorities and the ballot box and make New York a national leader in voting rights at a time when it couldn’t matter more,” **Senator Myrie said.**

The NYVRA will both address a wide variety of long-overlooked infringements on the right to vote and put in place protections that are among the strongest in the country. Notably, the legislation would establish “pre-clearance” -- requiring localities to seek approval from the state attorney general before changing any voting procedures. Pre-clearance is widely considered the core of the federal Voting Rights Act, but in 2013, the Supreme Court effectively destroyed it.

Although its record on voting has improved in recent years, New York has a long history of discrimination against racial, ethnic, and language minority groups in voting. The result is a persistent gap between white and non-white New Yorkers in political participation and elected representation, a gap which the New York Voting Rights Act would help close.

The legislation includes:

- **Strengthening voter protection:** ensures that in any circumstance, the law favors the ability of qualified voters to cast valid ballots and have them counted whenever possible.
- **Causes of Action against Vote Dilution and Vote Suppression:** the primary “sword” of the law, this provides a more efficient and effective means of prosecuting cases in which at-large elections dilute minority voting strength.
- **Creating a non-partisan state-wide database:** to make information available for election administration and voting rights enforcement, including election results, voter files, shapefiles, and other key data from election authorities, as well as precinct-level Census data for each jurisdiction in the state.
- **Language assistance:** New York has an extraordinarily high level of language diversity, but federal law only requires minimal language assistance to voters. The NYVRA raises the required level of assistance to language-minority voters.

- **Preclearance:** this was the the “Crown Jewel” of the federal civil-rights-era Voting Rights Act that was gutted by the 2013 Supreme Court Decision *Shelby v. Holder*. Preclearance means that localities who wish to make changes to their election procedures will have to get approval from the State Attorney General.
- **Voter intimidation protection:** the law provides legal remedies for attempts to intimidate voters, such as threatening to send immigrants’ voter registration forms to ICE
- **Attorney’s fees:** allows the recovery of attorney’s fees by plaintiffs in order to create enough of an incentive for enforcement.

**L Joy Williams, President of Brooklyn NAACP & Legislative Coordinator for the New York State Conference of Branches** said: “Although hailed as a progressive beacon, New York State has had numerous examples of voter suppression in recent years and we cannot wait for Congress to fix itself and strengthen the federal VRA. The New York State Voting Rights Act will give us the protections that a weakened federal VRA can no longer provide and gives us a greater sword to strike down any attempts to suppress our right to vote. The members of the New York State NAACP Conference of Branches commends Senator Myrie for the introduction of this important legislation and we will be alongside him in the fight during this legislative session to get the NYSVRA passed and signed into law.”

“The New York Votings Right Act (NYVRA) will protect historically disenfranchised communities from voter intimidation tactics and expand language access for non-English speakers. Common Cause/NY applauds Senator Myrie for introducing this legislation and looks forward to its passage,” said **Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY**.

"The New York State Voting Rights act proposed by State Senator Zellnor Myrie will protect Black New Yorkers and other people of color from voter discrimination fueled by restrictive

and onerous laws that chip away at minority suffrage," says **Lurie Daniel Favors, Esq., Interim Executive Director, Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College (CLSJ)**. "This critical legislation seeks to create a New York State version of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) and will restore many of the VRA protections that were gutted by the 2013 Supreme Court decision in *Shelby vs Holder*. These protections will allow our communities to more freely engage in American democracy by casting ballots to determine its future at every level. For more than 30 years, CLSJ has fought to protect and advance voting rights for New Yorkers of African descent and we are excited to see our state elected officials continue in this fight for justice."

"The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community is the fastest growing racial group across New York State, and increasingly make up a larger share of many districts' voting population. Unfortunately, state election law does not yet address the barriers that AAPI voters face in exercising their political power, particularly language access, anti-discrimination enforcement, or cohesion with other communities of interest in district," said **Amy Torres, Director of Policy & Advocacy at the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC)**. "CPC is thrilled that the New York Voting Rights Act would ensure that language minority groups, racial and ethnic minority-majority districts, and growing electorates like New York's AAPI community receive the access, visibility, and protection that allows them to fully exercise their influence."

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