



COMMUNIQUE

FIGHTING VOTER SUPPRESSION

NEW VOTING RESTRICTIONS IN PLACE FOR 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

This year, 17 states will have new voting restrictions in place for the first time in a presidential election. These new laws range from strict photo ID requirements to early voting cutbacks to registration restrictions. The repercussions of these voting restrictions will be far reaching for years to come, and could eventually make their way into New York if something isn't done to halt these tactics of keeping certain blocks of voters away from the polls.

Voter suppression laws as they are known concern allegations about various efforts, legal and illegal, used to prevent eligible voters from their right to vote. These laws place huge burdens on eligible voters trying to exercise their basic fundamental constitutional rights. In the last eight years, many states have passed stricter measures making it more difficult for certain ethnic groups to vote, particularly African-Americans, the elderly, students and those with disabilities.

As a union representing a heavy population of those categorized as minorities, fighting voter suppression is at the top of Local 1180's list, according to President Arthur Cheliotis. "We must engage in advocacy and litigation in order to stop these harmful voter suppression measures once and for all," he said. "The stories we have heard from members regarding the difficulties they have experienced at the polling places have been eye opening."

More than 30 states have considered laws that would require voters to present a government-issued photo ID in order to vote. Studies suggest that up to 11 percent of American citizens lack this type of identification and would be required to navigate governmental bureaucracy in order to obtain one or forego the right to vote entirely. Most will undoubtedly choose the latter.

Since 1965, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) has protected minority voters at the polls. It knocked down the suppressive measures that had previously prevented African-Americans from voting in the South for decades.

After the VRA was passed, federal registrars were sent to the South to register voters in the area's most segregated places like Selma, AL, where only 2% of the African-American population was registered to vote at the time.

This Selma story was turned into the critically-acclaimed film of the same name, and while it was expected to garner many votes for Best Picture in 2015, ended up receiving a paltry two nominations. In addition, the Academy's 20 acting nominations went to a group with no representa-

tion from communities of color. This situation ignited an onslaught of well-deserved criticism of the Academy and its voting process.

"It's ironic that a film depicting history about voter suppression at a time when voter suppression is surging in America did not receive more recognition," Cheliotis said.

According to the Center for American Progress Action Fund, "...too many Republicans are in a race-to-the-bottom to further disenfranchise voters. In 2014 alone, at least 83 restrictive voting bills were introduced in 29 states. This regressive wave of voter suppression efforts targets and most affects voters in the same communities already fighting for inclusion in other aspects of life: young people, low-income families, and people of color.

"This is a movie we have seen before. Despite plot twists — such as poll taxes, literacy tests, voter ID, and contracted early voting windows — and a changing cast of characters, the script remains the same: a concerted, coordinated effort to suppress the basic right to cast a vote and have it counted. "One might say it's as though some conservatives are vying for the Academy Awards of Voter Suppression."

Cheliotis said that in June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the coverage formula (Section 4) used for how the Justice Department enforces Section 5 of the VRA, which required jurisdictions with significant histories of voter discrimination to 'pre-clear' any new voting practices or procedures. In its 5-4 decision however, the Court did not strike down Section 5 itself, leaving it to Congress to devise a new coverage formula.

While that Shelby County v. Holder decision is now three years old, it's expected to have a huge impact at the polls for the 2016 presidential elections. State legislatures have been far more active since the Shelby decision, with more than 20 states, including New York, making positive changes for voters, like implementing online voter registration. But voting regulations have a long way to go.

"In some areas we have made progress, but it isn't enough. As we approach the first presidential election in 50 years without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act, we need to take further action," Cheliotis said. "We are asking our members to be vigilant when they go to vote and immediately report anything that seems out of the ordinary. States have wasted no time implementing new voting restrictions and we must do all we can to ensure that similar-type restrictions do not make their way into New York."