

Expand voting rights to move Alabama beyond its anti-democratic past

By Dev Wakeley, policy analyst | January 2022

Voting rights are a flashpoint in Alabama's history. The long denial of those rights to Black residents led to Bloody Sunday in Selma, the march to Montgomery and eventually passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the decades since, our state has taken a few steps that increase voting access for communities of color. Still, Alabama's voting systems remain unnecessarily cumbersome, expensive and exclusionary.

Alabamians seeking to exercise their fundamental right to vote often face numerous administrative hurdles and physical and procedural barriers. Recent legislative sessions have included repeated attempts to make voting more inconvenient for Alabamians and more burdensome for election officials.

Recent policy changes have made voting harder

Efforts to restrict voting have gained traction since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned parts of the Voting Rights Act in its 2010 *Shelby County v. Holder* ruling. And some of those more recent efforts in Alabama unfortunately have succeeded.

For instance, the 2021 regular session saw lawmakers ban curbside voting, a practice that [Mississippi expanded in 2020](#). Curbside voting would have increased polling place access for older and pregnant Alabamians, as well as people with disabilities. Echoing the state's long past of racist voting policy, the curbside voting ban finally passed after a procedural vote to cut off debate and silence a filibuster by Black senators.

Legislative attempts to make it harder for Alabamians to have their voices heard haven't stopped there. Some lawmakers also have sought to remove election officials' ability to provide extended hours or accommodations during declared emergencies. This measure would be particularly shortsighted in Alabama, where tornado outbreaks are routine during the primary election season in the spring and hurricanes remain a persistent threat during the general election season in the fall.

Pro-democracy policies would build a better Alabama

Ensuring that everyone's voice is heard is an essential part of building a better, more inclusive Alabama. Lawmakers can and should make numerous policy improvements to boost civic engagement and strengthen democracy in Alabama:

- Register voters automatically through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). [Automatic voter registration \(AVR\)](#) would increase turnout considerably. Twenty states (including Georgia) and the District of Columbia have approved AVR since 2015, [according to the Brennan Center for Justice](#).
- Remove the racist modern poll tax that requires repayment of fines and fees for people with a criminal conviction to regain voting rights. This disenfranchisement has its roots in post-Reconstruction efforts to sidestep the U.S. Constitution's ban on explicitly race-based voting restrictions. And this practice [continues to harm Black people at a far higher rate](#) than the overall population.
- Allow extended early voting for voters who can't make it to the polls on Election Day.
- Create a same-day voter registration process so voters who show up to the polls aren't excluded from casting ballots.
- Enable curbside voting to increase accessibility for voters who have mobility or health concerns.
- Eliminate the burdensome photo ID requirement for voters to cast ballots.
- Allow absentee voting without requiring voters to provide an excuse from a state-approved list.

Bottom line

Our democracy is strongest when everyone can participate. But Alabama has made that harder by erecting barriers that limit voting for many seniors, people with low incomes, people with disabilities and people who were formerly incarcerated. By enacting policies to protect and expand voting rights, lawmakers can move Alabama away from a shameful past and toward a brighter future where all voices are valued and included.