

Expand voting rights to right past wrongs and safeguard democracy in Alabama

By Dev Wakeley, worker policy advocate

Overview

Alabamians who want to exercise their fundamental right to vote often face numerous hurdles to exercising that right. These barriers – both physical and procedural – reduce civic engagement and election turnout.

Alabama does not allow early voting and has a complicated process for people who seek to vote an absentee ballot. And recent legislation has made voting more inconvenient for many Alabamians and built even more administrative hurdles to participatory democracy. But lawmakers have a range of policy options to reverse that trend and make it easier for Alabamians to make their voices heard through the democratic process.

Recent policy changes made voting harder in Alabama

The Legislature has passed several laws in the last decade to make voting more inaccessible. These laws have made a historically inequitable process even more burdensome, particularly for older adults, people with disabilities, and Black and Hispanic people.

These laws' enactments came after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2013 ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* overturned the part of the Voting Rights Act requiring preclearance in some jurisdictions. This provision had required the U.S. Department of Justice to review and provide advance approval for proposed voting law changes in Alabama and many other states with a history of racial discrimination in election procedures.

Shortly after the decision, Alabama began enforcing a 2011 law requiring certain forms of photo voter identification. Policymakers in 2015 also closed or reduced service hours at driver's license offices in dozens of counties. The state later reversed those cutbacks, which had caused disproportionate harm in Black communities.

Lawmakers created another barrier to voting in 2021 by banning curbside voting. Curbside voting, used successfully in Mississippi and other states, would make it easier for many older adults, pregnant voters and people with disabilities to access polling places.

Another limitation on civic participation came in 2024, when the Legislature passed a law that makes it a felony to receive or provide funding knowingly for certain forms of assisting voters with absentee ballot applications. The threat of

criminal penalties likely will have a chilling effect on organizations and people who are trying in good faith to assist voters who need help.

Other proposals in recent years have sought to create further limits on Alabamians making their voices heard. These bills have included attempts to remove election officials' ability to respond to declared emergencies by extending voting hours or accommodating voter needs.

Pro-democracy policies would build a better Alabama

Alabama has a painful history of dismantling systems that ensure democracy if doing so would help those in power. But our state can and should pursue a better path by lifting barriers to civic participation and making it easier for all Alabamians to make their voices heard at the ballot box.

Here are a few policies that would strengthen democracy in our state:

- Register voters automatically through driver's license offices unless they choose to opt out of registration. Automatic voter registration increases voter turnout, and it has worked well in states like Georgia and West Virginia.
- Remove the modern poll tax that requires repayment of fines and fees before many people convicted of a criminal offense can regain voting rights.
- Allow an early voting period for voters who cannot make it to the polls on Election Day.

- Create a same-day voter registration process.
- Remove the ban on curbside voting to increase accessibility for voters with disabilities and for older voters.
- Eliminate the burdensome photo ID requirement for voters to cast ballots.
- Allow absentee voting without requiring voters to provide an excuse.
- Make Election Day a state holiday.

Bottom line

Hostility to democracy and civic engagement is a longstanding and shameful characteristic of Alabama's racist and discriminatory past. And recent new voting limitations unfortunately have demonstrated that the anti-democratic mindset remains a powerful presence in our state.

Pro-democracy policies like early voting and automatic voter registration would help move Alabama away from its shameful past. Removing policy barriers to voting in Alabama would help build a more equitable future where our policymakers are responsive, inclusive and justice-serving, and where every Alabamian can stay engaged in the policymaking process.

Former Arise senior policy analyst Mike Nicholson contributed to this fact sheet.