



WASHINGTON VOTING RIGHTS ACT

Every Voter Deserves a State Voting Rights Act

The Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA) will ensure all communities have a fair chance to elect candidates of their choice in local elections. For government to be accountable, all voices need to be heard. But some election systems prevent all neighborhoods from being represented in local government. The WVRA empowers local governments to fix this widespread problem.

Communities Are Systematically Excluded

99% of local elections in Washington use at-large voting systems. Where communities vote in blocs, slim majorities can dominate. Bloc voting and other electoral problems exclude communities from a fair chance at being heard. The WVRA will enable local governments to give all communities a fighting chance to elect some representatives who represent their viewpoint.

The WVRA Is a Sensible Solution

The WVRA is intended specifically to impact local elections—state races are not included. Nor does it change results of past elections. Rather, it helps local governments fix the exclusion problem by allowing them to voluntarily change their voting systems. The WVRA also allows ample time to act before going to court. This avoids expensive federal litigation and gives local governments the ability to fix their electoral systems without interference from a federal court.

The WVRA Is Tailored to Local Needs

The WVRA recognizes that every local community is different. It does not mandate any particular voting system, nor does it mandate that candidates of any particular color or ethnicity get elected. Instead, it allows the problem of voter exclusion to be solved in whatever way works to give everyone an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. Any community, regardless of skin color, can benefit from access to this kind of fair representation.

These Protections Must Be in State Law

The federal VRA has been an important tool for defending voting rights, but it is under attack in the U.S. Supreme Court and could be changed. Washington needs its own set of voter protections. The WVRA will not only protect our state's communities, but avoid expensive litigation under the federal VRA.

California's VRA Has Worked

In 2002, California passed the California Voting Rights Act. Since then, its VRA has worked to improve the fairness of local governments there where local elections systems have excluded minority communities. The WVRA is modeled on that successful legislation.

Protect Our Voters— Pass the WVRA Now

In our democracy, everyone's vote should count equally. No voter or community should ever be denied an equal opportunity to influence elections because of the color of their skin or the sound of their last name. Every voter in Washington deserves the protections of the WVRA. Now is the right time to enshrine voting rights protections in state law.

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WASHINGTON VOTING RIGHTS ACT — *Frequently Asked Questions*

What is the Washington State Voting Rights Act?

The Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA) is a bill to help ensure that every voter has an equal opportunity to elect the candidate of his or her choice. The WVRA empowers local governments to fix the widespread problem of voter exclusion in local elections.

What is the problem the WVRA seeks to address?

Nearly all local elections in Washington use at-large voting systems. Where polarized voting exists, an at-large system prevents some voters from having a meaningful voice in local elections.

Imagine that a city elects 10 councilmembers at-large. If 60 percent of its voters prefer funding for parks in election after election, then only candidates who run on a platform to fund parks will win and occupy all 10 seats on the council – this is called “polarized voting” and can be documented via statistical analysis that is accepted by the courts.

So even if 40% of voters prefer funding for public safety because they live in a less safe area of town, their viewpoint has no representation on the council, and candidates have no incentive to consider that viewpoint.

But under the WVRA, that city would be empowered to change to a district-based system under which the 40% public safety minority could elect some candidates to the council to represent their viewpoint.

How will the WVRA help local governments?

The WVRA allows local governments to solve the problem of voter exclusion and avoid expensive federal litigation by proactively tailoring a local solution that fits their unique electoral picture. The WVRA also empowers local governments to take action to remedy voting problems before a citizen files a complaint.

Have other states passed similar legislation?

In 2002, California passed the California Voting Rights Act. Since then, the California VRA has worked to restore fairness where elections systems in localities have excluded minority communities. The WVRA is modeled on that successful legislation.

Does the WVRA require the election of candidates of color?

No. While race may play a role in voting patterns, this bill does not mandate that candidates of any particular color get elected. It only mandates that every individual have an equal opportunity to elect the candidate of their choice. Any community, regardless of skin color, can benefit from a tool that ensures this kind of fair representation.

Does the WVRA mandate district-based elections?

No. It is only in very specific circumstances that the WVRA can be applied—where voters from certain communities are being denied an equal opportunity to influence elections. It can also apply to district-based elections that deny an equal opportunity to influence elections, but this is less common.