



LWV and Democracy Groups Challenge New Tennessee Law That Undermines Voter Registration

NASHVILLE – The League of Women Voters of Tennessee, along with American Muslim Advisory Council, Mid-South Peace & Justice Center, Rock the Vote, and Spread the Vote, filed a federal lawsuit today challenging a new Tennessee law that imposes substantial penalties on groups that foster political participation via voter registration efforts.

The American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU of Tennessee, Campaign Legal Center, and Fair Elections Center represent the League and other partners in this case.

Tennessee ranks 44th in voter registration, but during the 2018 midterm election the state saw a surge in registrations. Instead of providing greater resources to help election offices process the influx, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a measure that creates criminal and civil penalties against those who fail to comply with onerous requirements and turn in “incomplete” applications. The governor signed the bill into law last week.

The complaint charges the new law violates freedom of speech, freedom of association, due process, and the fundamental right to vote under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Along with the lawsuit, the groups filed a notice letter to the state citing violations of the National Voter Registration Act.

The following comments are from:

Marian Ott, president, League of Women Voters of Tennessee: “Making sure that voters are properly registered and have the information they need to cast their ballot has been a priority of our organization for nearly 100 years. Voter registration surges like what Tennessee saw in 2018 should be celebrated, not penalized. We see this law as a threat to democracy and a direct violation of our Constitution.”

Sophia Lakin, staff attorney, ACLU’s Voting Rights Project: “Tennessee politicians are punishing civic organizations that advocate for people’s right to participate in the political process and assist Tennesseans in registering to vote. With its dismal voter registration rates, Tennessee needs these groups on the ground. What politicians should be doing is making sure that local election officials have the adequate resources to do their jobs. Silencing civic groups’ voices is not the solution.”

Hedy Weinberg, executive director, ACLU of Tennessee: “The right to vote is the bedrock of our democracy and voter registration drives are a precursor for many to exercise that right. Voter registration drives have long been a way for communities that are historically disenfranchised — including students, people of color, immigrants, and senior citizens — to empower individuals and gain access to the ballot box. The ACLU filed this lawsuit because we are committed to ensuring political participation for all eligible voters.”

Paul Smith, vice president, Campaign Legal Center: “Tennessee’s law has created the country’s most aggressive penalties for voter registration drives. If the court does not intervene, the state will unlawfully chill the efforts of organizations working to get people registered. Voter registration drives for years have been a way for historically marginalized groups to empower their communities and gain access to the ballot box. We are taking Tennessee to court to protect that tradition against government threats of fines and jail time.”

Paul Garner, organizing director, Mid-South Peace and Justice Center: “It is already hard enough to get people registered to vote in Tennessee. What this draconian law effectively does is punish those that want the democratic process to reflect and represent as many people as possible in communities like Memphis. It is voter suppression, plain and simple.”

Michelle Kanter Cohen, counsel, Fair Elections Center: “Voter registration drives are critical to making sure that everyone gets an equal voice in our democracy. Instead of penalizing honest civic engagement efforts, Tennessee should be opening doors to participation, not shutting them in the faces of community-based registration drives who are working to engage fellow citizens.”

Marissa Goldfaden Bleier, general counsel and communications director, Spread the Vote: “Spread the Vote has been helping people overcome various barriers to the ballot box for two years. This law will have a chilling effect on voter registration, further disenfranchising marginalized communities. We’re proud to fight it alongside other voting rights organizations.”

Carolyn DeWitt, president and executive director, Rock The Vote: “Young voters are new voters and as a result they are often overlooked. Third parties play a significant role in our democracy, ensuring all interested and eligible voters are able to exercise their freedom to vote. By undercutting national and community groups’ abilities to effectively reach and mobilize marginalized communities, including young people, this new law would have a detrimental effect on our democracy.”

The lawsuit, *League of Women Voters of Tennessee v. Hargett*, was filed in U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee. Co-counsel also includes Sherrard, Roe, Voigt & Harbison PLC.

The complaint is at: <https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/lwvt-v-hargett-complaint-0>

The notice letter is at: <https://www.aclu.org/legal-document/lwvt-v-hargett-notice-letter>

This statement is at: <https://www.lwv.org/newsroom/press-releases/lwv-and-democracy-groups-challenge-new-tennessee-law-undermines-voter>

Case information is at: <https://www.aclu.org/cases/league-women-voters-tennessee-v-hargett>

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