



## Voter Suppression in the United States and the Impact on Mental Health

An official statement from the Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice (formerly the American Orthopsychiatric Association).

### Introduction

The Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice is a behavioral health organization that embeds its work in human rights and social justice principles, including non-discrimination, respect, and dignity. We believe that all people have the right and responsibility to participate fully in our democracy. The Global Alliance strongly opposes all attempts to restrict this most fundamental constitutional right. The strength and vibrancy of our democracy are dependent on the right of all people to vote regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, zip code, economic status, ability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or party affiliation.

### Problem Statement

The right to freely elect government representation affirms the importance of each individual's contribution to our society's social fabric and order. Although the U.S. Constitution protects the right to vote, this right has often come into conflict with eligibility requirements established by states. Efforts to protect voting rights have included:

- Four constitutional amendments, the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th, which affirm that no citizen should be denied the right to vote based on race, sex, ability to pay poll taxes, or age, mental illness, cognitive and emotional impairments, respectively;
- The Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in elections and is considered a signature achievement of the civil rights movement;
- The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, which requires voter registration materials to be available in all state offices that offer services to all people, including those with disabilities;
- The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), which made significant reforms in the voting process, including improving access to voting for all.

In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby v. Holder* significantly weakened the VRA's protections, clearing the path for states to pass laws that disenfranchise voters and discriminate against voters of color. **Since January 2021, we have witnessed state after state**

**introducing legislation to restrict our freedom to vote, especially for people of color and young people.** In 47 state houses across the country, more than 360 bills have been introduced that would weaken our democracy and make it more difficult for Americans to vote.

A vibrant and inclusive democracy is a determinant of health, including mental health (Wise & Sainsbury, 2007). Such restrictive efforts not only threaten a cornerstone of our democracy, but they have significant ramifications for mental health and well-being. Indeed, the right to vote implies inclusion and confers a sense of dignity and confidence. The right to vote also promotes self-determination, as it allows individuals to influence law and policy (Woolf & Braveman, 2011). Further, civic participation has been shown to benefit well-being (e.g., Kim et al., 2016), and studies suggest that political engagement has a positive effect on mental health and stress (Hope et al., 2018; Klar & Kasser, 2009).

### **Call to Action**

It is long past time we established national standards for voting to ensure all of us have a voice in decisions that affect our lives and protect our common home.

**We call on members of Congress to pass both the *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* and the *For the People Act* (H.R.1) to stop the voter suppression activities we are currently seeing in 47 state legislatures.**

- The *For the People Act* would set standards so that every eligible voter has equal access to the ballot box by streamlining voter registration, stopping the purging of voters from registration records, cracking down on voter intimidation, ensuring more secure and accessible options to vote, and reducing long voting lines by expanding early and absentee voting.
- The *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* would help protect eligible voters from racial discrimination and voter suppression by ensuring voters have equal and unfettered access to the democratic process.

### **References**

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