

Speech given at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. celebration on January 16, 2012

We are:

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and Byrd Lochtie

Not surprisingly, we're here to talk about voting and voters' rights, and to speak out strongly against recent troubling national trends to limit access to voting for significant groups of U.S. citizens.

We are here today, fully authorized to speak at this gathering for our local League of Women Voters of Humboldt County, 160 members strong, and with full support from the national League of Women Voter United States, 150,000 members strong.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence is signed, beginning the process which led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution, on which ALL voter's rights legislation should have its base.

It seems appropriate to begin with a brief timeline of events which chronicle the pendulum-like swing of voters' rights legislation since the founding of our country.

In our nation's earliest beginnings, all citizens did NOT have the right to exercise the franchise, the right to vote. In 1776, the right to vote is guaranteed to only white male property owners.

Nearly 100 years pass, the nation more than doubles in size, and in 1856 the right to vote is finally expanded to include ALL white men.

From 1861 to 1865 (150 years ago), a war of monumental proportions is fought on exclusively American soil. 650,000 Americans lost their lives, the previous nation was devastated, and from the ashes a new nation arose, a nation in which legalized slavery is ended

The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1870, which states:

The right OF CITIZENS of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race, color, or previous servitude.

That means the majority of persons living in the United States were excluded from the franchise: all women and all men of color including African Americans and Native Americans. There was much to be done.

And a series of radical, groundbreaking laws are made part of the U.S. Constitution. Among these is

Immediately, many states begin enacting measures such as voting taxes or literacy tests to restrict the ability of African American to vote. Violence and intimidation to prospective non-white voters become commonplace. The Civil War is dead, but Jim Crow is born.

The pendulum swings back in 1887 with the Dawes Act which grants citizenship to Native Americans.

Fast forward... 1920. Woman win the right to vote when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment is ratified.

Yippee!!!!

The Amendment states:  
The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.

1924 -- Citizenship is finally granted to all Native Americans.

In the 1950's and 1960's, a great struggle ensues

In Little Rock

And Selma

However, Native Americans must give up their tribal affiliation in order to be considered citizens.

Yippee!!!!

But two years later the Supreme Court rules that people of Japanese heritage are ineligible to become citizens.

Within two more years, other Asians and Filipinos are also denied the right to citizenship, and hence, the vote.

Nonetheless, many states continue to enact laws to effectively prohibit Native Americans from voting.

And Birmingham

And across the nation, including in Washington D.C, on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial.

We celebrate today the life of a great leader, Martin Luther King Jr. and all those who worked with him to guarantee civil rights to ALL U.S. citizens.

The Civil Rights Movement was about equal rights in ALL areas of life in America.

And in 1963, voting rights are FINALLY (after much suffering and demonstration and perseverance) established as CIVIL RIGHTS in the United States.

1964: the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment is ratified with numerous clauses related to the elimination of poll taxes as a prevention to voting.

1965: A sigh of relief -- the Voting Rights Act is signed into law by President Johnson. Essentially, it restates the provisions of the Reconstruction Amendments and again asserts the right of U.S. citizens to vote.

But, at its crux, it was about the right of ALL U.S. citizens to SAFELY and FREELY vote for the candidate of their choice.

Sadly, many state officials still refuse to allow African Americans to vote. The battle is not yet over.

Still, voter registration for African Americans remains dangerous in many states. What will it take to finally ensure the right to vote for all?

Why isn't there a Constitutional amendment written at that time to ensure these voting rights?

The pendulum continues to swing. It's 1971 and the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment is passed.

It states:

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Because the central premise of our American ideal is that ALL the citizens of the country should have the opportunity to exercise the right to vote.

Well, in the Presidential election of 1960, 63.1% of the population of voting age actually voted.

That's a truly significant number!

BECAUSE THERE ALREADY WERE SUCH AMENDMENTS: THE 13<sup>TH</sup>, THE 14<sup>TH</sup>, AND THE 15<sup>TH</sup>!!!! They just had not been upheld and enforced across the United States.

And, in 1993, legislation is passed to make voter registration more accessible to all U.S. citizens. Why?

It is what we, as a nation, stand for. It's what we, as a nation, hold as a goal for the rest of the world.

So, have we been successful?

However, after that election, numbers slide dramatically. In fact, it wasn't until the presidential election of 2008 did the numbers even come close again: 56.8%

So, for all our efforts to ensure that ALL US citizens have the right to vote, people still are not getting to the polls in numbers that make them truly representative.

That brings us up to the present.

Today, we are facing a challenge to voting rights that harkens back to the days of:

Slavery  
Civil War  
Reconstruction  
Woman's suffrage  
The Civil Rights Movement

New laws across the nation, put in place since the swing election of 2010 seek to limit the right of many to vote, ostensibly to prevent voter fraud, by requiring photo identification in order to vote.

Is voter fraud is a huge problem?

Ah. While there are many claims made, the actually numbers appear to be extremely small. In a story from the New York Time October.26, 2010

Still, even if it is a problem, is requiring photo ID the best strategy to deal with it?

Our election system already has a system of checks in place to prevent fraud. For example, even if you were to scour the obituaries and attempt to vote using the name of a deceased person, you still have to place that vote in the precinct of the deceased.

“A report by the public-integrity section of the Justice Department found that from October 2002 to September 2005, the department charged 95 people with “election fraud”; 55 were convicted. Among those, fewer than 20 people were convicted of casting fraudulent ballots.”

No. The most important way to eliminate any hint of voter fraud is to insure that the voter registration rolls are clean, accurate and up to date.

Imagine the scene: A man enters the precinct of a deceased citizen hoping to use his name to vote fraudulently. He announces that he is Mr. Gray and then gives his address. The blue-haired lady working the precinct desk as a volunteer (she’s probably a League member) snaps her head up hoping to see a miracle since two weeks ago she attended the funeral of her friend of 40 years, Mr. Gray himself.

Seriously, while there have been occasions of voter fraud over the years, laws to limit accessibility to voting will not eliminate fraud. We all know that fake ID's are produced worldwide.

The League of Women Voters is firmly opposed to these measures. We believe they move us away from the strides we have made as a democracy and republic since 1776.

“These anti-voter laws are passing state legislatures at an alarming rate. They are cloaked as an attempt to bring integrity to our election systems yet many are now seeing them for what they really are: an assault on voters and one of the greatest self-inflicted threats to our democracy in our lifetimes. The new laws threaten to silence the voices of those least heard and rarely listened to in this country -- the poor, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, the young, and persons with disabilities.

Restrictions which require specific voter ID act only to prevent the young, the poor, the old, the disabled and other minorities from voting.

In the words of our League of Women Voters United State President, Elisabeth McNamara regarding a statement by Attorney General Eric Holder:

She continues: “While we applaud Mr. Holder’s speech, we are disappointed in the Department of Justice’s record on voting rights enforcement. The League of Women Voters calls on the Department of Justice to act more forcefully and without delay to ensure fair elections in 2012. The voters are depending on Mr. Holder and the Department of Justice for real action on their behalf. Born out of a movement to expand the franchise, the League of Women Voters continues to fight to protect the foundation of our democracy and will continue to work to ensure every eligible voter is allowed to vote and have their vote counted in 2012 and beyond.”

As our history review earlier showed, the challenge of ensuring the right of citizens to vote has been ongoing. The pendulum has swung back and forth. Grassroots action has made the difference in motivating the government to do the right thing, EVERY TIME. That is what is needed now.

NO. NOT HERE. NOT EVER.

Regardless of our own political viewpoints, organizations like the League, AARP, NAACP, and many other like-minded groups, as well as individual citizens like all of us here, must join forces, rise up and say

NO. NOT HERE. NOT EVER.

Write, call, email your legislators and tell them you oppose ANY action that restricts voting rights and accessibility for U.S. citizens.

Thank you.

That's what it takes. That's what it's always taken.

Thank you.