

What to Know About the Voting Rights Act

The 1965 law was meant to address fundamental inequities in American life, and was one of the signal accomplishments of the civil rights movement.

By Sonia A. Rao, in *The New York Times*, April 29, 2026

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of the most momentous pieces of civil rights legislation in the United States, was passed almost 100 years after the 15th Amendment prohibited racial discrimination in voting in the wake of the Civil War.

The bill, championed by Black activists and signed by Lyndon B. Johnson, a white president from a segregated state, culminated decades of activism by those who fought for voting rights in a country scarred by slavery.

Here's what to know about it.

What is the Voting Rights Act?

Even after the 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870, Black people in the South during the Jim Crow era faced intimidation that prevented them from voting, including poll taxes, literacy tests and crusades of violence.

The Voting Rights Act, signed by Johnson during the height of the civil rights movement, was meant to enforce the rights that were protected by the Constitution.

Provisions of the law helped thousands of voters get to the polls, and for the first time since Reconstruction gave Black citizens in the South a significant voice in their government.

What does it do?

At the time the law was passed, only one-third of eligible Black voters were registered in the states where voting was the most difficult, compared with two-thirds of white people, according to the Justice Department.

One section of the act required several Southern states with histories of discrimination to obtain federal permission before changing voter laws. Those states included Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia and many counties of North Carolina.

The measure also prevents voter discrimination based on the language they speak, and provides protections for blind, disabled and illiterate voters. The Justice Department has called the law the "most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the United States Congress."

What challenges has it faced?

Congress has extended the Voting Rights Act several times, but there have been many legal challenges as well.

In 2013, the Supreme Court dealt a sharp blow to the law with its ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a case filed by an Alabama county near Birmingham. The court ruled 5 to 4 that states could change election laws without federal approval, which contributed to a wave of voting restrictions from Republican-led states.

On April 29th, 2026, the Supreme Court ruled 6 to 3 to strike down a voting map in Louisiana, finding that lawmakers had illegally used race when drawing it, further weakening the act.

**In Alabama Case, Supreme Court Faces First Major Test of Voting Rights Act Ruling
Republican leaders in the state have asked the justices to clear the way for a congressional map that a lower court found discriminated against Black voters.**

By Abbie VanSickle, *The New York Times*, May 27, 2026

Alabama Republican leaders asked the Supreme Court on Wednesday to allow them to use a congressional district map that a lower court this week determined discriminated against Black voters. The fight over Alabama's map will be the first major test of how the justices intend to apply their recent ruling narrowing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The push to switch out Alabama's congressional map — a move that could advantage Republicans in the heated fight to maintain their razor-thin majority in the House in the midterm elections — began immediately after the justices' April ruling that raised the bar to bring a discrimination claim under the landmark civil rights law.

In response, Republicans in Alabama sought to swap out their state's congressional map and use one that had been rejected by courts in 2023 that included only one majority-Black district, rather than two. A ruling by the Supreme Court in Alabama's favor would most likely cost Democrats one of those seats. The court already instructed a lower court once to review the Republican-proposed map in light of its April ruling, which found that courts should strike down maps only if there is evidence they were drawn with an intent to discriminate and not simply to obtain partisan advantage.

Although critics of the ruling had feared that standard would be impossible to meet, a panel of three federal judges found on Tuesday that the state's actions violated even the new, higher bar set by the Supreme Court and once again nixed its use.

In the emergency request filed on Wednesday, Alabama officials asked the court to move swiftly to clear the way for the state to use the map in special primaries in August for four House districts affected by the change in district lines.

In the application, they argued that the Supreme Court's April ruling "vindicates Alabama's position on the lawfulness" of the Republican-friendly map and asserted that the lower court had erred by once again concluding the map was discriminatory and acting as if the Supreme Court's updated test had "changed nothing."

The Alabama officials requested a ruling by 10 a.m. on June 1, or "as soon as possible thereafter." They urged the court to act quickly, saying they wanted to be able to resume election preparations and to assign voters into districts before the election.

The Supreme Court will now have to decide whether to greenlight the Republican-friendly map — a map that a lower federal court has found meets the justices' new test for a violation of the Voting Rights Act — or to block it and provide a new path for challenging maps as racially discriminatory.

In the weeks since their decision, the justices have faced public scrutiny for issuing a decision in the middle of a heated primary season. The move set off a scramble among Republican-led states in the South to redraw district lines and unravel majority-Black districts, even as voters began to make their primary selections.

In public appearances, the justices have addressed the criticisms. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., a conservative, has defended the court, insisting the justices are not political actors. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, a liberal, has been critical of the court's decision to act with elections already underway.

Indeed, the lower court judges found this week that allowing Republicans to change the state's map now could sow confusion given that the election will be held in August.

By now, the Supreme Court justices are familiar with the longstanding fight over Alabama's congressional map.

In November 2021, the state's Republican-controlled Legislature redrew its congressional voting map, maintaining one majority-Black district out of seven in the state, although Black voters comprise about a quarter of the population.

Black voters and advocacy groups challenged the map under the Voting Rights Act. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, which, in a surprise decision in June 2023, agreed that the state's map diluted the power of Black voters.

Alabama lawmakers then redrew the map but still maintained only one majority-Black district. The new map split up the state's Black voters, many of whom live in a crescent-shaped region known as the Black Belt, a historically fertile farming region that had a long history of slavery and segregation.

A three-judge panel found in 2023 that this map also illegally discriminated against Black voters.

The panel that reconsidered the issue this month in light of the recent Supreme Court decision included two judges appointed by President Trump and one appointed by President Bill Clinton. Again, they concluded that the map was an illegal racial gerrymander.

"We cannot see our way clear to requiring Alabamians to cast their votes in the 2026 elections under a districting plan tainted by intentional race-based discrimination," they wrote in a 79-page decision.

The judges wrote that they were "painfully aware of the gravity of our ruling." But, they added, "we do not find the issue particularly complex or close."