

INTRODUCTION

Organized in response to the 2013 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v Holder* that removed vital protections under of the Voting Rights Act, the **National Commission on Voting Rights (NCVR)** was convened by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law along with over a dozen national partners to examine the state of voting across all fifty states.

Between June 2013 and May 2014, the NCVR conducted 25 state and regional hearings sponsored by national, state and local organizations and overseen by a distinguished panel of national commissioners and local guest commissioners. These hearings gave hundreds of voters, advocates, scholars and activists an opportunity to testify on the wide range of issues impacting voters today. NCVR hearing testimony, analysis of state voting laws, and a review of recent voting rights litigation produced an extensive record of both voting discrimination and election administration issues.

The NCVR's first report, *Protecting Minority Voters: Our Work is Not Done*, released in August 2014, concluded that voting discrimination is an ongoing and prevalent problem in the United States, particularly in states in the South; the first report also provided an in-depth analysis of the various barriers to voting that African American, Latino, Asian American and Native American voters continue to face.

Acknowledging the vast universe of existing data and research on election administration, most notably the Presidential Commission on Election Administration's recommendations to improve the voter experience, this second NCVR report, *Improving Elections in the United States: Voices from the Field*, focuses primarily on the voices of the people impacted by how elections are run in their communities—the successes as well as the challenges—through the compelling testimony provided by witnesses at the NCVR hearings in 2013 and 2014. The testimony illustrates the continuing tension that exists in our nation's election system between access and barriers. On one hand, the recent passage of state laws and initiatives to modernize elections has undoubtedly made voting more accessible for many voters. Same day and online registration, early voting, vote centers that let voters cast their ballots outside of the traditional neighborhood-based precinct, and the pre-registration of young people before they turn 18 are just a few examples. However, as the NCVR also heard, many states continue to fall short, either by moving too slowly away from outmoded systems and practices, failing to adequately enforce existing legislative requirements or, worse, proactively rolling back voters' basic rights through restrictive legislation. This Report highlights the many voices of constituents, advocates and activists who are impacted by these election

administration practices, including economically struggling voters, voters with disabilities, young voters and voters who have been disenfranchised due to a former felony.

Beginning with a timeline of significant legislation and court decisions impacting the way elections are administered in the United States, the Report then explores the following areas:

- **Voter Registration** – Section I provides examples of the types of expansive registration programs that encourage participation in the electoral process, such as online and same day voter registration. The Report also highlights practices that continue to make it harder for people to register. These practices include noncompliance with federal voter registration laws and rollbacks of state laws that have made it easier to register.
- **Election Day and Voting** – Section II examines the creative strategies and technology states and counties are employing to minimize long lines and streamline the voting process for voters. One such example is the development and implementation of election administration plans (EAPs) to create a more efficient process for planning and running elections. This section also highlights the obstacles to voting that many voters still face on Election Day due to variety of factors, including insufficient poll worker training or understaffing at polling locations; excessively restrictive voting laws and/or cuts to laws that encourage participation; and shrinking budgets that restrict counties from upgrading old and malfunctioning voting equipment.



National Commission on Voting Rights Hearing Locations

- **Expanding Access and Engaging all Eligible Voters** – Section III details the experiences of three constituencies who consistently participated and shared their stories at the NCVR hearings: **voters with disabilities, citizens with felony convictions struggling to regain their right to vote**, and **students and young voters** who want to be an active part of their communities’ voting process.

It is our hope that this Report will be a valuable contribution to the existing record on election administration and encourage the expansion of programs that allow greater ease and access to the ballot and secure a voice for all in our democracy.