

We Have a Heart Condition

by **Sandy Sorensen**
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With the 2016 presidential campaign accelerating into high gear, and spring primary elections not far off on the horizon, much of the public dialogue and attention is on the candidates themselves. However, there is relatively little national conversation about the current process of voting itself. This is troubling given that voters will go to the polls in November for the first presidential election in 50 years without key protections contained in the Voting Rights Act, which was significantly rolled back by a 2013 Supreme Court ruling.

Just last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act, and films like the movie *Selma* recalled the sacrifice, courage and faith of the civil rights movement in the struggle for racial justice and fair representation. Could it be that our memories are so short-lived?

Voting is often described as the heart of the democratic process. It is the most fundamental access point for individuals, giving each of us a voice in the public policy decision-making process that can shape the future of our local, regional, national and global collective life. History shows us that a robust democracy with a vibrant marketplace of ideas makes us stronger. This should lead us to expand and strengthen voting rights and access to the electoral process, not restrict them.

In 1965, members of Congress on both sides of the aisle boldly came together across significant differences to expand and protect the right to vote. Yet the Voting Rights Advancement Act, legislation to modernize and improve the Voting Rights Act in the wake of the 2013 Supreme Court decision, sits stalled in Congress and is unlikely to move in an election year charged with partisanship.

This week in North Carolina, a trial examining a change in the state's voter identification law that would narrow voter participation by requiring one of 6 approved forms of identification is underway. One of the plaintiffs is 94-year-old Rosanell Eaton. In 1942, Rosanell Eaton, traveled two hours by mule to register to vote. She was required to recite the preamble to the Constitution by memory and take a written literacy test, in doing so and became one of the few African American voters on the rolls in the Jim Crow era.

After the 2013 North Carolina voter identification restriction was passed, Rosanell Eaton was ineligible to vote because the name on her voter registration card (Rosanell Eaton) did not match the name on her driver's license (Rosa Johnson Easton). In 2015 she made four trips to the Department of Motor Vehicles, four trips to two different Social Security offices and three trips to different banks, covering 200 miles, all to be able to preserve her right to vote. North Carolina is not alone. Other states, including Alabama, are undergoing changes in voter identification requirements are restricting access to the polls.

Every presidential election year, we are reminded of the power of the democratic process. Around the world U.S. leaders extol free elections and the democratic process. Yet our own laws are running counter to this message.

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to voting rights and strengthening the democratic process. If voting truly is at the heart of the democratic process, as many have said, we as a people are in critical condition. With all the current shortcomings in our electoral system, and there are many, it is worth fighting to save.

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