



## It's Raining

Sandy Sorensen

Director of the United Church of Christ Washington Office

On Tuesday, August 6, with much of the news understandably focused on the aftermath of the tragic mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton, a milestone civil rights anniversary passed with little public attention: the 54th anniversary of the signing of the Voting Rights Act, one of the most significant and impactful legislative victories of the civil rights movement.

The reality is that voting rights and gun violence are deeply intertwined. Indeed, voting rights are intertwined with every issue we care deeply about, from climate change to health care. This year's anniversary is tinged with the painful irony that, as we approach a critical 2020 election season, we have fewer voter rights protections than when the bill was signed in 1965.

In June 2013, the Supreme Court issued a decision in the case of *Shelby County v Holder* that suspended the use of the most effective protections against racial discrimination in the Voting Rights Act, thus rendering the remaining sections of the VRA to be insufficient in ensuring voter protections.

When the *Shelby* decision was rendered, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts declared in the majority opinion that key provisions of the VRA, including preclearance, were no longer necessary because the racial disparities they addressed no longer existed. In her dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote that "throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet."

Following the *Shelby* decision, state lawmakers around the country adopted discriminatory policies and restrictions that make it harder for Americans to exercise their right to vote. Voting discrimination remains a reality as reflected in recent election cycles, with documented cases of bias in purging voting rolls, restrictive voter identification laws, last-minute changes in polling locations, and instances of voter intimidation and suppression.

These actions are just the tip of the iceberg of threats to the integrity of our electoral process. House-passed funding for enhancing election security is stalled in the Senate, along with the House-passed Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore the provisions of the Voting Rights Act that were gutted in the Shelby decision. In fact, there are a host of measures that could be taken to strengthen the integrity and fairness of the electoral process, including measures to address the flood of corporation and special interest money in election campaigns.

If voting truly is at the heart of the democratic process, as many have said, we are in a terrible storm. It is all the more troubling that we have the “umbrellas” we need to be protected from the storm. What we lack is bipartisan political will. This crisis transcends partisanship. It goes beyond political party identification to our core values as a nation and the centrality of a citizen’s free vote, not limited by the powers of money, social class and unequal access to voting. It will take all of our voices, our persistent energy and action to demand that our national leaders respond to this storm. We have the way; we need the will.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Sorensen is the Director of the United Church of Christ Washington Office

**LEARN** [ucc.org/justice](http://ucc.org/justice)

**DONATE** [ucc.org/donate](http://ucc.org/donate)

ARCHIVE  
**WFJ** [bit.ly/witness4justice](http://bit.ly/witness4justice)

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*