

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 2, 2020

CONTACT:

Rich Robinson, Fair Elections Center, robinson@fairelectionscenter.org or 202.696.3406

Tennessee Removes Anti-Voter Registration Provisions Following Federal Legal Challenge

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – In a victory for voting rights, Tennessee lawmakers today repealed onerous restrictions previously enacted in a 2019 law that sought to restrict and impose harsh penalties on community voter registration efforts.

The American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Tennessee, Campaign Legal Center, and Fair Elections Center, had challenged the measure in a federal lawsuit filed last year on behalf of organizations that conduct voter registration activities in Tennessee.

Plaintiffs are the League of Women Voters of Tennessee, American Muslim Advisory Council, Mid-South Peace & Justice Center, Memphis Central Labor Council, Rock the Vote, and HeadCount.

The law was passed in the wake of a surge in voter registrations prior to the 2018 midterm election. However, instead of providing necessary resources to help election offices process the influx, state lawmakers instead passed a measure that created criminal and civil penalties against those who were unable to comply with onerous new requirements. The measure threatened to curtail or completely suspend the efforts of key voter registration groups across the state.

Last fall, a federal court blocked the law from taking effect as the case was being litigated, enabling community voter registration groups to continue their efforts. A new bill was subsequently passed — and signed into law today — that stripped out the challenged unconstitutional provisions.

The following are reactions to today's repeal:

Michelle Kanter Cohen, senior counsel, Fair Elections Center: “Tennessee tried to shut its doors on community voter registration drives last year, but thanks to the court’s decision and the resulting legislative changes, those doors to voter participation have been reopened. Community voter registration drives serve a critical role in our democracy: these community-based civic engagement efforts are badly needed in Tennessee and cannot be replaced with technology.”

Theresa J. Lee, staff attorney, ACLU's Voting Rights Project: “The law we challenged was one of the most aggressive attempts ever in the U.S. to restrict voter registration groups. The court ruling blocking the law and the state’s subsequent repeal send a clear message that such draconian restrictions will not stand in Tennessee or elsewhere.”

Danielle Lang, co-director, Voting Rights & Redistricting, Campaign Legal Center: “Voter registration drives are crucial means for historically marginalized groups to empower their communities and gain access to the ballot box. We are heartened that Tennessee will now keep the door to civic participation open for organizations doing the critical work of registering their fellow citizens.”

Thomas H. Castelli, legal director, ACLU of Tennessee: “The legislature’s repeal of this law allows groups doing the critical, on-the-ground work to keep our democracy running to continue their vital efforts. Voter registration drives are essential to ensuring that historically disenfranchised groups — including students, people of color, immigrants and senior citizens — can exercise their right to vote. We are pleased that our lawsuit succeeded in restoring voter registration and expanding access to the ballot box in Tennessee.”

The law firm of Sherrard, Roe, Voigt, Harbison was co-counsel on the case.

Statement: <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/tennessee-removes-anti-voter-registration-provisions-following-federal-legal>

Case details: <https://www.aclu.org/cases/league-women-voters-tennessee-v-hargett>