



Voting Rights Position Paper

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. (Declaration of Independence, 1776)

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The right to vote is arguably the most fundamental of our rights as citizens of the United States, giving each of us a voice in choosing our leaders who then determine the laws and regulations that govern our society.

Moved by the stirring rhetoric on which the nation was founded, most of us embrace the universal interpretation of the term “all men” as meaning all citizens. To the Founders, however, it was white male property owners who would secure those rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; in their view, freed black men, women, people without property, enslaved Africans, and Native Americans lacked the capability to participate in any aspect of government.

Today, in spite of our evolution in understanding “all men” to include everyone over 18, attempts are still being made to deliberately deny voting rights to poor and/or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) men and women. The Clinical Social Work Association has grave concerns about certain state-level proposals that are moving forward which could seriously limit access to the right to vote. As clinical social workers, our code of ethics requires that we respect the inherent dignity and worth of our clients. As part of this, we promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination, which is embodied in the right to vote.

Knowledge of the history of voting rights is important in understanding where we stand today. The Founders' interpretation of voting was not challenged until after the emancipation of enslaved Africans and the end of the Civil War, when in 1866 the 14th Amendment guaranteed voting rights to "all male citizens of each State" older than 21. In the early days of Reconstruction, formerly enslaved citizens started businesses, built communities, and became leaders. This soon drew a backlash, and, tragically, progress was quickly reversed in several states. Barriers to Black men voting included the poll tax, so called "intelligence" tests, threats, intimidation, outright violence, and terrorism. Nor were efforts to enforce the 14th Amendment successful: states that had put legislative power exclusively in white men's hands were able to pass white supremacist/Jim Crow regulations, limiting options for Black citizens, native Americans, and other non-white minorities as well.

It was another 50 years, in 1920, before President Wilson signed into law the 19th Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. This was dramatic progress indeed, but even here, enforcement issues arose. The Amendment clearly includes both Black and white women, but in those states that had been effectively preventing Black men from voting, the same barriers were employed to prevent Black women from doing the same.

Finally, in 1965, strong effective protections for voting rights were established in the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in voter registration requirements, as well as in schools, public accommodations, and employment. It was an effective deterrent to voter suppression for its 50 years. Unfortunately, in 2014 Congress and the Supreme Court determined that voter suppression was no longer a serious problem and let the law expire. CSWA's belief is that, to the contrary, the lapse of the Civil Rights Act reopened the door to renewed efforts to restrict access to voting, especially for BIPOC citizens and/or those living in poverty.

Clinical social workers know how relevant the vote can be in addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH) that have resulted in BIPOC communities having less access to social services, to education, to transportation, to affordable housing, and to health and mental health care: in short, institutional racism. We understand that each vote denied takes away a voice speaking out to establish

standards for which cities and towns get parks and policing and which get dumps and jails; a voice speaking out to overturn discriminatory policies determining how banking is regulated and the way that loans are made; a voice speaking out to support local education, to encourage investment where there are food deserts, and to overturn red-lining practices.

This is a time when clinical social workers can make an impact on the important need for increased equity in the voting system, not increase restrictions to voting. We strive to promote meaningful participation in decision making for all people. The Clinical Social Work Association has always supported voting rights of all citizens from the 690,000 individuals who live in the District of Columbia and have no representation in Congress, and to any BIPOC or other group whose votes may be at risk due to state legislation.

To be clear, as clinical social workers, we support the following specific voting rights: *the inclusive right to vote, easy access to voting machines, reasonable hours to vote which reflect the needs of working voters, and elimination of government ID barriers to voting.*

Let your state and national representatives know how important it is for all American citizens to have these rights to make their votes count. Our voices as clinical social workers will make a difference. Here is a website which can help you understand the status of voting rights in your state:

<https://deadlinefordemocracy.org/find-event?source=endcitizensunitedactionfund>