



Senate Judiciary Committee
New Jersey State House
125 W State St, Trenton, NJ 08625
OLSAideSJU@njleg.org

RE: S282, The John R. Lewis Voter Empowerment Act of New Jersey

Dear Chair Stack, Vice-Chair Singleton-Jackson, and members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of **Human Rights First** to express our strong support for passing and fully funding *the John R. Lewis Voter Empowerment Act of New Jersey (S282)*, which is a New Jersey-specific state voting rights act.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization that fights for the conditions that uphold democracy and equitable voting rights which is a cornerstone of any healthy democratic nation.

New Jersey has in recent years passed measures to strengthen its democracy, with bills that provide access and protections for voters, but certain communities still face hardships when accessing democratic processes including voters of color, voters with disabilities, and those whose first language is not English. Likewise, the United States is experiencing broadscale rollbacks to hard-won civil rights at the federal and state levels. New Jersey must therefore take proactive measures to safeguard its democratic processes by ensuring the ballot box remains accessible to all communities.

It is absolutely critical that the state takes immediate steps to guarantee its voters are protected against an administration that is blatantly hostile towards democracy and voting rights. The devastating recent Supreme Court decision in *Louisiana v. Callais*, which follows in the steps of *Shelby County v. Holder* ruling significantly weakened the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is now on the shoulders of New Jersey to ensure its citizens—and its democracy—are protected

A strong New Jersey-specific voting rights act (NJVEA) will: (1) establish a state “preclearance” program that makes local governments with a history of discrimination prove to the state that certain changes to the voting process would not harm voters of color before they go into effect; (2) provide new legal tools to fight discriminatory voting rules and procedures in court; (3) expand

language access and assistance for voters with limited English proficiency so that they can fully participate in the democratic process; (4) pass strong protections against intimidation, deception, or obstruction at the polls for voters and election workers; (5) create a public, central database for election and demographic data information that would empower officials and communities to ensure accessible elections; and (6) make sure local and state voting laws, procedures, and regulations do not deny voters of color and other protected categories of voters the right to cast their vote. If passed, the NJVEA would be one of the most comprehensive state-level voting rights acts in the country, building on successful laws already on the books in Maryland, Colorado, Virginia, New York, Connecticut, California, Washington, Oregon, and Minnesota.

Enacting the NJVEA is essential to ensuring a strong democracy in New Jersey and creating a scaffold for other states to follow in its lead at a time when democratic decline is rampant across the nation. New Jersey voters cannot wait. With the federal VRA weakened, we need you to protect our voting rights when the federal government won't.

Therefore, we strongly urge this Committee to pass and fully fund S282, the *John R. Lewis Voter Empowerment Act of New Jersey* today.

Sincerely,

Hanah Stiverson

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Director of Democracy In Action