

Restricting Voting Rights Act could mean fewer African-Americans on city councils

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Efforts to limit the reach of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), the legislation that banned discrimination in voting, could negatively impact black political representation, according to a new study from researchers at Rice University, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Ohio University.

"Are We There Yet? The Voting Rights Act and Black Representation on City Councils, 1981-2006" is one of the first studies to take a "big picture" look at a large sample of city councils over time to see where African-Americans are making gains, where they are adding or losing seats and whether they have ever been elected in the first place.

The research found that the city councils with the strongest gains in African-American political representation are those that have been protected by Section 5 of the VRA; that section requires states with a history of racial intimidation and discrimination to get approval for changes in their election practices or procedures from the U.S. attorney general or the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Between 1981 and 2001, the number of cities covered by Section 5 of the VRA with at least one African-American city council member increased from 552 to 1,004—an 82 percent change. The number of cities not covered that had at least one African-American city council member increased just 3.3 percent—from 732 to 756.

Melissa Marschall, professor of political science at Rice and the study's co-author, said that the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2013 decision to

strike down Section 4 of the VRA, the provision of the civil rights law that designates which parts of the country must be covered by Section 5, could have a harmful impact on black participation and representation.

"It is important to understand the consequences of the discriminatory practices of the pre-civil rights era," Marschall said. "Blacks not only encountered a number of vote-dilution practices (including barriers to registration) and outright voter intimidation, but they also faced significant economic barriers that limited their socio-economic advancement. The VRA was designed to dismantle obstacles that discouraged black political participation."

Since its initial passage in 1965, the VRA has sought to ensure suffrage—initially for blacks and later for Latinos and other language minority groups—with the goal of increasing the political participation of these groups both as voters and as candidates for elected office.

Marschall hopes the research will demonstrate the important role VRA plays in ensuring black political participation and representation, particularly in places with a history of discrimination.

The study is one of the first to examine the impact of Section 5 of VRA on black representation in city council districts. The study used data from 1981 through 2006 collected by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and the International City County Manager Association.

More information: The study will appear in an upcoming edition of *The Journal of Politics* and is available online at [journals.cambridge.org/action/ ... e=online&aid=8981954](http://journals.cambridge.org/action/...e=online&aid=8981954)

Provided by Rice University

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