



Strengthen Democracy in Local Elections: Pass the Washington Voting Rights Act

The Problem: Unfair election systems deny some communities a meaningful voice in local elections.

Democracy works best when everyone is engaged and has an opportunity to have their voice heard. However, under current state law the majority of Washington’s local governments are required to use at-large voting in general elections. So, the same majority of voters can decide the result for every council or school board seat in a town, city, or county. As a result, some communities do not have fair chance to elect candidates of their choice – candidates who will advocate for their needs in local government.

The problem has led to successful lawsuits under the federal Voting Rights Act that have changed the election systems in Yakima and Pasco. But such federal litigation is very time-consuming and costly – both for communities seeking fair representation in government and for the jurisdictions that are sued.

The Solution: The Washington Voting Rights Act

The Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA) promotes healthy democracy by empowering people at the local level to work with their elected representatives to ensure all voices in the community are heard. It offers a means under state law to fix unfair election systems and gives every voter a fair chance to elect candidates of their choice. At the same time, it offers local jurisdictions a fair and collaborative process for changing outdated election systems and a clear opportunity for them to avoid litigation. It provides a roadmap for local governments to create their own solutions to meet local needs.

The WVRA removes the restriction under state law that prevents local governments from improving their election system. Its provisions allow local governments ample time to act before going to court. Specifically, it requires people and groups bringing challenges to election systems to provide notice before they file suit and provides a pathway for local officials to work together with those bringing the challenge to address the problem voluntarily, without costly litigation.

In short, the WVRA makes local government more accountable to the people it serves. It gives all communities an equal opportunity to elect officials who represent their needs and interests.