



ON DEMOCRACY'S FRONT LINES

In the face of widespread threats to voting access and integrity, the ACLU launches new election protection and voter expansion efforts to defend our most precious franchise.

**BY JAY A. FERNANDEZ
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY MADDIE MCGARVEY**



City Clerk Garland S. Doyle administers elections for Pontiac, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit.

ALL CIVIL RIGHTS

and civil liberties depend on reliably fair, safe, and secure elections. Yet at a time when voter engagement is at record highs, anti-voting legislation and bills designed to undermine the electoral process have surged. At the start of the 2022 legislative session in January, 96 bills that would restrict voting had been introduced in 12 states, and 41 bills that would undercut election administration had been introduced in 13 states.

To preserve access to the ballot and prevent election interference, election protection is an all-hands-on-deck priority for the ACLU. The push is particularly acute in battleground states, where narrow vote margins determine everything from the president to the local sheriff. Anti-democratic forces are raging, and democracy demands a furious defense.

“If there’s anything we’ve learned from the past few years, it’s that our democracy is fragile,” says Christopher E. Bruce, the ACLU of Georgia’s policy and advocacy director. “It always has been, especially when it comes to Black and Brown people, the LGBTQ+ community, women, Indigenous peoples—a whole host of individuals who have been kept from exercising their full rights.”

But there is hope to be found in activating the community. “There are plenty of people who are siding with what’s right and just,” says Bruce. “We have to be bold, and we have to back each other up to make real, impactful change.”

In advance of the midterms this fall, the ACLU is working to fortify election machinery at the hyperlocal level. Here we highlight a few of the many individuals in three crucial battleground states—Michigan, Ohio, and Georgia—who are moved and motivated to do everything they can to uphold the democratic process.

ENSURING BALLOT ACCESS IN MICHIGAN

In 2018, the ACLU of Michigan played a pivotal role in the passage of Proposition 3, which made voting easier in the state by amending the state’s constitution to include automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, and no-excuse absentee voting. While brainstorming how to protect these new rights, the ACLU identified the 1,600 city, county, and township clerks responsible for overseeing elections in the state. “As we gear up for 2022 and 2024,” says ACLU of Michigan Field Director Jessica Ayoub, “clerks are going to be the centerpiece of preserving our democracy and ensuring that Michigan has free and fair access to the ballot.”

Among other duties, clerks make sure that voters know their rights and clear barriers to the ballot box. Through a new statewide clerk engagement program, which Ayoub administers, four dedicated ACLU of Michigan field organizers are collaborating with local partners to educate clerks about the power they hold to protect the vote. This can include designating polling locations, voting hours, on-site translators, and other elements critical to administering a fair election.

Garland S. Doyle was appointed city clerk of Pontiac, a suburb on the northwest edge of Detroit, by the city council in 2018. As the chief elections administrator for the city, he oversees an eligible voter pool of 45,000. To minimize barriers to voting, he’s instituted extended evening and weekend hours and established a city clerk service team to visit the homes of voters who are homebound, or in hospitals and shelters. He partnered with the ACLU, Voters Not Politicians, and the local NAACP chapter to use their social media accounts and other networks to communicate with residents about key voting information in his jurisdiction, which is two-thirds Black and Latinx. And his office recently received a grant to purchase ballot drop boxes for each of the city’s seven voting districts.

“It’s the job of the clerk or the local election official to ensure that everyone can vote,” says Doyle, whose mother volunteered for the Department of Elections when he was growing up in Detroit. “We have a much better democracy when more people participate. An informed voter makes, in essence, the right choices.”

Oakland County Clerk Lisa Brown, who’s been in the role since 2012, oversees election administration for an eligible voter pool of more than 900,000. She has collaborated with the ACLU on securing access to the ballot for people awaiting trial as well as with other county and municipal clerks to tabulate votes for surrounding communities. Brown also prioritizes trainings for election workers on how to deal with intimidation or violence at the polls.

“Those who want to make it more difficult for people to vote target certain demographics when they create restrictions or obstacles to the ballot,” says Brown, a lifelong resident of Oakland County and a graduate of Michigan State University and the Detroit College of Law. “It is taking away somebody’s power. Denying equality and equity to certain groups—I will always fight against that.”

Canton Township Clerk Michael A. Siegrist oversees an election for 75,000 registered voters. Since first being elected in 2016, he has worked relentlessly to address a host of voting issues, from long lines on Election Day and outdated electronic poll books to technological issues with tabulators and polling locations with accessibility issues. Working with Michigan Voices, America Votes, and other coalition groups on election protection, Siegrist helped ACLU staff understand voting procedures and best practices at the local level. (In the 2020 election, Siegrist also worked with the ACLU as an observer and challenger for absentee ballot counting amid a cacophony

of anti-tabulation protest.) Moving into the next two election cycles, he is using microtargeted data from geographic information system firms to do a redistricting proposal that could help expand voting by mail and streamline the administration of polling precincts by being precise about staffing and other needs at each polling location.

A big believer in public institutions and the democratization of knowledge, Siegrist has served on the Canton Public Library Board and his school district's board of education. He'd planned to join the family accounting business until he chaired the absentee voting counting board in 2010. He got so hooked that he admits he now gets teased for being as optimistically civic-minded as *Parks and Recreation's* Leslie Knope (who navigated local politics next door in fictional Pawnee, Indiana).

"Being an election administrator at a time when it feels like our democracy is in such peril from both outside and internal factors is really challenging," says Siegrist, who's always lived in the Canton area and describes himself as "the most Midwestern person you've ever seen." He says: "There's something unique going on here that is very dangerous, and

it takes away some of the fun, civic part of the job. But it also gives the job more gravity and importance. Who is in these roles really does matter, and it matters how seriously they take their oath. To me, it's almost spiritual; it's about being a part of something much bigger than myself."

It's a sentiment shared by Ayoub, who was born and raised in the Detroit suburb of Canton, and worked in community engagement for AmeriCorps before earning a master's in social work at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. "It seems like all roads were pointing here in my advocacy journey," she says. "I was always looking for something that would have a tangible impact on expanding and protecting justice, and voting rights is one of those fundamental things that needs to be protected. The clerk engagement campaign is critically important to ensuring that voters have as many accessible options as possible and that we have elected officials who represent the democracy that voters want to live in."

ENGAGING RURAL COMMUNITIES IN OHIO

In early 2020, the ACLU of Ohio began a series of meet-the-community events in smaller cities and towns where social justice organizations didn't have much presence. The surprising turnout made it clear that more intentional rural organizing could tap into a previously unheard but eager swath of ACLU-aligned voters. A subsequent statewide organizing effort driven by four new full-time field organizers resulted in 15 issue-driven action teams led by 2,000 volunteers, mostly around the urban hubs of Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus.

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The city of Pontiac has extended evening and weekend voting hours and will purchase drop boxes for each of the community's seven voting districts.





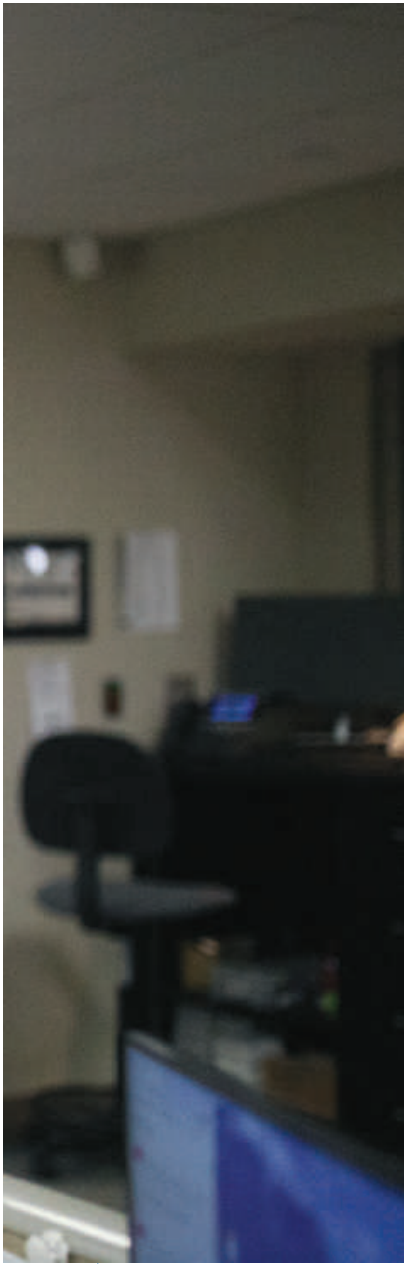
The results were so promising that it led to an innovative new strategy that would target 23 previously overlooked counties in the Appalachian region of southeast Ohio.

Since the summer, a new full-time organizer native to the region has been recruiting local volunteers and supporters in southeast Ohio to engage with their communities about the issues of concern to them in the lead-up to the 2022 and 2024 elections. “We know that trust takes time and we are new to the region, so the first phase is deep listening,” says ACLU of Ohio Policy Director Jocelyn Rosnick, who is shepherding the pilot program. “We’re trying to bridge the statehouse-to-neighborhood divide through engaging people in our priority issues—obviously election work and voting are huge for us.”

While the affiliate has driven hyperlocal efforts related to voting rights before, this new program signals a shift toward engaging communities that may historically have been dis-

engaged from the ACLU’s issues. The goal is to bring people together in a deeper understanding of the voting rights landscape and to find overlapping values that can coalesce in policy changes. The program includes a public education campaign about how votes are counted and certified to build trust in the process in the face of disinformation, as well as how racial injustice impacts the voting system. Rosnick sees great potential because Ohioans in the region have shown that they are committed more to consistent values than political parties.

“These are folks who have seen the economy tank, the steel mill shut down, the automakers leave, that have been hit hard by the opioid epidemic, and they have moved the voting blocs accordingly,” she says. “Where we are in 2022 is a far cry from where we were in 2004 or 2008. So there is a lot of opportunity. Everyone potentially can be an ACLU ally.”



Canton Township Clerk Michael A. Siegrist works with local organizations to address voting issues, including outdated technology, and expand voting by mail.

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Rosnick, who is celebrating a decade with the ACLU of Ohio this year, planted her activist roots early. Born in Steubenville on the eastern edge of the state in Jefferson County, she famously testified at a city council meeting in neighboring Weirton, West Virginia, at age 9 to protest its proposed earlier Halloween hours (while in costume, naturally). And as a teenager during the 2004 election, she worked as a volunteer driving people to the polls. “It just got me really excited about elections and voting rights, and taking any chance I have to help,” says Rosnick, who eventually moved back to Cleveland to get her law degree at Case Western Reserve University School of Law.

While the heart of the affiliate’s organizing work will remain focused on the most populous counties of Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus, investment in the southeast may provide breakthroughs that could be replicated not just in other rural areas of the state but also in demographically similar states such as Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. At the same time, as relationships are strengthened, these new supporters become more likely to get involved with other civil liberties issues and the ACLU’s work around the state. “We’re trying to build a movement in the region,” says Rosnick. “There is hope when people from different backgrounds and different places come together. We’ve seen it before, we can do it again. All hope is not lost in the world of democracy and voting rights.”

PROTECTING THE COUNT IN GEORGIA

In the 2020 presidential election, Georgia’s 16 electoral votes were decided by fewer than 12,000 votes, underscoring just how much every pro-voting effort matters. Among the most novel and effective election protection efforts in the state has been the ACLU of Georgia’s campaign to recruit and train a new generation of poll workers.

The program was piloted during the June 2020 primary election when the perfect storm of COVID-19, the widespread rollout of new voting machines, and a record number of in-person voting requests from absentee ballot voters left the election infrastructure gutted and overtaxed. With partners such as Power the Polls, the ACLU of Georgia actively recruited younger people less at risk of complications from the virus, tech-savvy people with professional IT experience, and people who are exacting with procedure, and provided them with community support and supplemental training.

“When you work as a poll worker, it takes a lot of stamina,” says ACLU of Georgia Senior Policy Counsel and Deputy Political Director Vasu Abhiraman, who has been a poll worker himself at least eight times in recent years. “Folks who are committed to ensuring that every eligible voter who shows up can cast a ballot that gets counted, who follow the right procedures, those are the most valuable in the system.”



Jessica Ayoub of the ACLU of Michigan leads a statewide campaign to educate clerks about their power to protect the vote.

After the primary, Abhiraman and his colleagues expanded the program into the 2020 general election and Senate run-offs, placing 1,000 poll workers in high-need areas in the major counties around Atlanta, where more than a third of the state's population lives. The result was that approximately 16 percent of Georgia voters in those cycles had an ACLU-trained poll worker or deputy registrar at their location. The affiliate has ambitious plans to double or triple that during the 2022 and 2024 cycles as they expand into 80-plus counties with the help of dozens of partners.

In concert with the secretary of state's office, the ACLU of Georgia has worked to alert county election administrators about its roster of highly trained poll workers,

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whom they can reliably staff at their precincts to minimize delays and mistakes. ACLU of Georgia Policy and Advocacy Director Christopher E. Bruce persuaded the state to establish a continuing legal education credit for lawyers who work at polling locations as deputy registrars. Once trained in that role, they have the authority to cancel absentee ballots from voters who show up at the polls to vote, a process that clogged the system during the primary. As a result, the hour-long waits in Fulton County became five-minute waits during the November 2020 election. Bruce plans to expand that program to outlying metro Atlanta counties to complement the growing community of ACLU-trained poll workers on the front lines protecting democracy.

“If you want to perform your civic duty, I can't think of any better way to do it than being a part of the levers of our democracy that make our sacred right to vote manifest,” says Abhiraman. “Election misinformation is at an all-time high. If you want to be a force in your community for breaking that down, there's no better way than to learn the process inside and out. Then, when any misinformation comes up, you can be a resource for the truth.”

Poll workers trained in the program are now joining local boards of elections, where their hands-on expertise helps them combat misinformation and maintain best practices about how elections are run in their jurisdictions. The ACLU of Georgia has recruited supporters to join its new Local Election Advocates and Defenders (LEAD) pilot program, through which volunteers monitor board of elections meetings and flag issues, such as plans to curtail early voting options or shut down polling places in majority-minority precincts.

“We have more of a spotlight on what it takes to maintain a democracy than ever before,” says Abhiraman, a second-generation immigrant who has long seen voting as a force for inclusion. “We have an opportunity to get more and more people involved who can be authoritative voices on elections. It'll take time, but if we do this right, we'll be able to fully debunk misinformation, end threats to our democracy, and build something better, with people who really care about civic engagement in the front lines of our system.” ■

THE SOUTHERN VOTING PROJECT

In the run-up to the 2020 election, the ACLU's Southern Collective—a collaborative network of a dozen ACLU affiliates in the South—launched the Southern Voting Project to confront the region's unique legacy of voter suppression and intimidation. With racial justice at its core, the Southern Voting Project mobilized around expanding absentee ballot access, building a more robust voter-contact infrastructure, strengthening election protection, and running electoral boot camps to train volunteers.

These investments in activating historically disenfranchised voters resulted in record-breaking turnout. As the next election cycles loom, the Southern Collective is ramping up its resources to advance these voting rights efforts and push Southern states closer to a truly equal system in which every eligible voter has easy, safe, and secure access to the ballot.

“We have long understood that systems do not create change,” says JaTaune Bosby, the ACLU of Alabama's executive director. “But our desire for liberation, equity, and equality ignites it.”

Visit aclu.org/action to learn more about election protection.