

Research Article

Unearthing disenfranchisement of Black and Brown voters: Preparing adult learners for critical consciousness and political resistance

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Introduction

Given the pervasive voter suppression laws being passed in key battleground states across the country since 2013, it is incumbent on adult education programs to ensure that adult learners receive high-quality education in the areas of civic and citizenship education, American history, African American history, and critical literacy to counteract any assault on American democracy. This article explores the recently passed voting rights legislation in Georgia, Florida, and Colorado to determine the degree to which they enfranchise or disenfranchise voters. Considering that studies have shown that four-year college completion strongly correlates with more political engagement among its graduates (Burns et al. 2001, Hillygus, 2005), it is critical that the concepts pertaining to critical literacy and civic education occupy a prominent position in the teaching of adult learners in both two-year and four-year colleges. Historically, adult education schools have played pivotal roles in inculcating the value of appreciation of the past and understanding of the present to African American adults and other historically marginalized groups. The Highlander Folk School is a notable example of an informal adult school that was founded in 1932 in Tennessee by Myles Horton. Septima Clark, an African American educator who was the Director of Education at the Highlander Adult

School is widely viewed as the pioneer in grassroots citizenship education given her role in organizing citizenship education workshops (Parris, 1958). While many more Highlander model adult schools were later opened in the South and nationwide, the nature of the curricular content and the dialogic delivery approach which focused on seeking solutions to contemporary problems has not been extensively replicated in adult education programs. There is, therefore, a strong need to make a case for adult education programs to infuse civic and citizenship education in colleges and universities so as to inculcate in students problem-solving skills for contemporary societal problems.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is a landmark piece of U.S federal legislation that forbids racial discrimination in voting. It was enacted to protect the voting rights guaranteed in the Fifteenth Amendment as well as the equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S constitution. Many Americans are completing their adult education programs with little comprehensive knowledge about these political problems and the critical skills to tackle them. This paper is partly written to raise awareness among adult learners and their educators and to offer possible solutions.

In an ideal democratic society, the government would take pride in promoting civic education and citizens' participation in the voting process considering that it is vital for more, and not less, voices to be heard; otherwise, the outcome of an election will not reflect the will of the people. However, some state legislators have been making the voting process much more inconvenient and cumbersome for eligible voters like Black and Brown people, the elderly population, college students, and people with disabilities. Given the limited space, this paper focuses on Black disenfranchisement. The road to a harmonious and peaceful democratic society is predicated on equitable representation, equal justice, and broad-based inclusion of all citizens regardless of their racial, ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This paper discusses various forms of voter suppression which have been used to disenfranchise Black votes. Some of the voter suppression legislation found in states with a long history of disenfranchising Black voters include: restrictive voter ID, armed poll watchers, purges of voter rolls, cuts to early voting, reduction of polling stations in minority neighborhoods, and legislative redistricting (also known as gerrymandering).

Contextual Background

Voter suppression is a form of structural violence. Galtung (1969) defines structural violence as one that has no direct actor because the violence is infused in the structure during the construction or reconstruction of the system and manifests itself in the form of unequal power distribution and subsequently unequal opportunities in life. The U.S. has a history of laws non-white groups from not allowed to vote until the federal government and all denying voting rights to basis of "race, color, or servitude." While the excluded women, the also known as the

Black men were not allowed to vote until 1870 when the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibited federal government and all state governments from denying voting rights to any male citizen on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

that prevented women and voting. Black men were 1870, when the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited state governments from any male citizen on the previous condition of Fifteenth Amendment Nineteenth Amendment women's suffrage amendment, granted women the right to vote in 1920, 50 years after the passing of the

Fifteenth Amendment. While women were demonstrating in the streets and petitioning their local and federal governments for women's suffrage, Black men who were enfranchised through the Fifteenth Amendment consistently faced an array of structural barriers to voting in the South from 1870 to 1965.

Congress did not provide a mechanism for enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment. As a result, many states did not follow the law. For example, prior to 1965 southern states like Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama instituted "literacy" tests to supposedly prove that someone was educated enough to vote (Onion, 2013). White men who did not pass these tests were still able to vote under the Grandfather Clause which authorized them to vote if their grandfathers had voted by 1867. Proof of poll tax payment, among other unnecessary obligations, was required to register and to vote in Jim Crow States (Smith, 2020). In addition to removing many of the barriers that prevented Blacks from voting, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 imposed federal oversight (a 'preclearance') on any proposed state changes in voting policies and procedures. This mandate was specifically directed at southern states which had historically and systematically suppressed Black votes. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had a dramatic impact because it enfranchised more Black voters. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelby County v. Holder* that the 1965 Voting Rights Act subjecting jurisdictions to preclearance was no longer needed. This 5-4 decision opened the floodgate for a myriad of restrictive voting laws in many states nationwide. Alabama was one of the states that was subjected to preclearance since 1965. The state has been the epicenter of the battle for voting rights for decades. Several of the pre-1965 voter disenfranchisement cases brought by the Department of Justice against Alabama, served as a catalyst for the passage of the *Voting Rights Act in 1965* and the last major reauthorization in 1982 to prevent voting discrimination (Blacksher et al., 2007).

Questions are often raised about the identities of people behind the well-coordinated efforts to suppress Black votes. The American Legislative Exchange Council is one of the many conservative groups, bankrolled partially by Charles Koch and David Koch, that has been at the forefront of voter suppression legislation (Berman, 2011). The people that they tend to target for voter suppression are often the elderly, people living in poverty, racial minorities, immigrants, students, and ex-convicts. Black people, however, tend to bear the brunt of voter suppression more than any other racial group and this explains why the authors of this study chose to focus on this demographic. For example, The Associated Press reported in 2018 that while African Americans represented just 32% of the Georgian population, they constituted 70% of the 53,000 voters whose voter registration had been suspended (Panetta, 2018). Civics and citizenship education need to be incorporated in adult education programs so that students will acquire different civic competency and advocacy skills to tackle voter suppression and systemic racism. When imbued with tenable problem-solving skills, students can organize themselves efficaciously to stem the ethos of oppression, as it was the case with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a sit-in movement that was founded in 1960 in North Carolina by Black students to fight racial segregation (Shor, 2004).

Analytical Framework

For this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used to analyze some of the different state laws related to voting and elections. CRT began in 1970s as a critique of the traditional legal scholarship which focused on policy analysis related to individuals and groups in socio-cultural contexts (Ladson-Bilings, 1998). At its

founding, CRT scholars decried the lackluster implementation of Civil Rights Act and sought to change the bond between the law and racial power as well as sought to comprehend the origin of white supremacy (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT is a useful analytical framework for adult learners to understand the pervasive voter suppression bills and laws around the country. It is undergirded by the premise that the society is fundamentally socially unequal and racially stratified, where political and economic power tend to be concentrated in the hands of the dominant groups, thereby leaving the racially dominated groups perpetually oppressed and subjugated (Hylton, 2012). CRT investigates this power dynamic. It is important to analyze power in light of the more recent voter suppression legislation in a number of key battleground states.

CRT asserts that whiteness confers enormous ubiquitous privilege that is invisible to whites but very visible to non-whites (Marx, 2007). In the book *Critical Race Theory* edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Ian Lopez (2001) states that the U.S. Congress's first words on the question of citizenship in restricted naturalization to "white persons; that making whiteness a racial prerequisite for becoming a naturalized citizen remained in the books for more than 150 years. While applicants from the Philippines, Japan, China, and Burma argued unsuccessfully in court as to how and why they ought to be considered white, applicants from Armenia and Mexico were often accepted in court as white and thus eligible for U.S. citizenship. Every adult learner should be versed with CRT in order to effectively decode and deconstruct systemic racism and oppressive electoral laws.

Method

The overarching research question, as stated in the introduction, was to explore to what extent recently passed voting rights legislation in Georgia, Florida, and Colorado enfranchise or disenfranchise voters. The two researchers for this paper found a segment of interpretive qualitative research to be the most suitable method to answer this research question. The researchers used document analysis for the research. Document analysis is defined by Bowen (2009) as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). The document analysis for this paper encompassed a broad but meticulous selection, and in-depth review and synthesis of primary and secondary sources to develop a deeper understanding of voter enfranchisement or disenfranchisement in the U.S. Document analysis comprises private and public records that can be obtained in newspapers, books, journals, pamphlets, minutes of meetings, diaries, letters, e-mails, social media, blogs, archival materials in the libraries, and on websites (Creswell, 2002). The researchers for this paper found document analysis to be effective for this research because it provides vital information about policymaking, lawmaking

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and the phenomenon being studied. The main critique of employing document analysis in qualitative research is that, the documents could be hard to come by. Fortunately, it was not the case with this study not only because of the currency of voting legislation, but also because the researchers of this study have subscriptions to a wide range of newspapers and academic journals. Therefore, they were able to access historical and contemporary documents for this study. They were able to locate all the news articles and the bills related to voter's legislation. The content of the documents, like

proposed legislation, congressional testimony, and news articles, were triangulated for accuracy through constant comparative analysis with other sources reporting the same or similar information (Glaser et al., 1967). In other words, for each of the states that was the subject of this study, the two researchers read the original legislation that was passed. They subsequently read multiple secondary sources about each of the bills. Only secondary sources that carried information that was corroborated by at least two other secondary sources were selected for coding and analysis. The decision to focus on Florida and Georgia was predicated on the contemporaneity and controversies of their individual state legislation on voting rights. The researchers sought to understand why some voting laws in the two states were creating angst in the communities of color, especially in Black communities. Colorado was included in the study because it offered a breathtaking contrast that could serve as an exemplar of what adult learners could strive for when advocating a genuinely inclusive voting rights legislation for all U.S. citizens. There was a plethora of secondary sources on Colorado's voting rights legislation, most of which were praising the state for being very inclusive in its electoral process.

During the data collection process, scholarly articles, newspaper articles, congressional testimony, legislation, and other information from state governments and non-profit entities were read and analyzed. Based on patterns of similarities of issues that emerged during the coding process, states with recurrent themes related to voter suppression laws were selected for detailed analyses along with those states identified as seeking to increase and support voter engagement. The study was limited in scope due to time and resources. Thus, the researchers were not able to delve into all the different voting laws of the 50 states to draw more similarities and contrasts. The findings of the study are shared in the subsequent paragraphs.

Findings

The right to vote is a fundamental constitutional right granted to U.S. citizens by the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments. Therefore, state legislation that infringe upon people's right to vote must be critically analyzed. As noted earlier, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a landmark piece of U.S federal legislation that sought to terminate the racial discrimination that prevented Black people from voting. The act transformed U.S. democracy by expanding access to voting for historically marginalized groups. While the Voting Rights Act was effective in curbing many forms of voter suppression, the findings of this study show that these efforts have been dramatically undermined in recent years. The findings will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs beginning with Florida.

Controversial voting legislation in Florida

The United States is currently experiencing a resurgence of controversial voting legislation which has been labeled by several experts as suppressive (Darrah-Okike et al., 2020). The implications of this are substantial as "fighting voter suppression has become the new battleground of American democracy" (Soedarmadji et al., 2019). In the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, *Wesberry v. Sanders* (1964), the Court emphatically stated, "No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined" (Morant, 2003). Unfortunately, the recent *Shelby County v. Holder* Supreme Court decision has made it possible for states to suppress Black and Brown votes.

Voter suppression which is defined as an effort to prevent eligible voters from voting or registering has disproportionately affected people of color, specifically Black people. The top

five primary ways that states have disenfranchised Black people are: redistricting, polling place closures and changes, restrictive voter registration laws, denying the formerly incarcerated people the right to vote, and voter purges.

In this study, we found that Florida is known for passing aggressive voter suppression laws. Most notable of these laws is the one that conspicuously forbids formerly incarcerated people the right to vote. The state exploited the loophole in the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that condones involuntary servitude if the person was convicted for a felony. For many years in Florida, ex-convicts did not have the right to vote even after “paying their debt to the society” for the crime of which they were convicted. In 2018, Floridians voted by 64% through ballot initiative to automatically restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated persons. The ballot initiative was championed by Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC), a membership organization run by the formerly convicted persons. Unfortunately, the state legislators and the governor thwarted the ballot initiative and the voters’ will by imposing a mandatory payment of all court fines and fees related to their sentences before they are allowed to vote (Prashar, 2020). Some people have equated such a subversive move to a “poll tax” that was used in most southern states after the Civil War to disenfranchise Black voters. Florida’s 2021 Amendment-4 that was supposed to enfranchise many former prisoners, many of whom are Black, was eventually modified to suppress their votes. Requiring the formerly incarcerated people to pay restitution, court fines and fees has made it almost impossible for most former prisoners to vote because 60% of inmates who are released from prison do not get hired by employers within the first year (Lorentzen, 2021).

Florida suppressed Black voters by curtailing the mail-in ballot option. In 2021, the state government of Florida made it harder for people to vote by mail-in ballot given that unprecedented number of people of color had been able to vote by mail in the 2020 elections due to COVID-19. Florida Senate Bill 90 was purportedly designed to secure elections and curb voter fraud when there was no evidence of widespread election fraud in the State. Florida Senator Dennis Baxley, a Republican and the chairman of the Ethics and Elections committee, who sponsored the bill was quoted as saying the 2020 election was “excellent, excellent” and that it was conducted with “very high credibility” (Man, 2021).

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The bill he proposed, in contrast to his foregoing statements, ended automatic mail-in ballots to registered voters for subsequent elections. It made it difficult for a voter to designate a person to grab their ballot or drop it off on their behalf (Senate Bill 90, 2021). The elderly population could have a harder time voting by mail under the new law. The bill also eliminated drop boxes. This means if someone was worried about losing their ballot in the mail, they would either have to go and queue up on election day to vote or not vote at all. As Man (2021) reported, “Of the six million people who requested and received mail-in ballots for the November 2020 election, 4.9 million people used them, which works out to 44% of every vote cast in the state last year.” It goes without saying that taking mail-in ballots off the table disproportionately hurts the elderly population, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, and people of color because of transportation issues and their less flexible work schedules.

Amendments of voting laws in Georgia

Until 2021, Georgia was one of the states with the highest active voter registration rates stemming from its state law that introduced automatic voter registration program for eligible Georgians at driver's license offices in 2016. In 2020, Georgia's active voter registration was at 95 percent compared to 76 percent in 2016 (Niese, 2021). Paradoxically, in April 2021, the state of Georgia that had given the impression that it wanted more, and not less, electoral participation for its citizenry, rolled out one of the most draconian voting restriction laws in the country. The law imposed stricter voter identification requirements on voters seeking to vote by absentee ballot. It strips many Democratic-leaning districts of drop boxes; criminalizes the act of offering water and/or a drink to voters waiting in-line; limits early voting in urban areas while expanding it in rural counties, and it gives more power to the State Legislature (generally dominated by Republicans) over elections (Corasaniti, 2021). In addition to these measures, the law shortened the time voters can request and return ballot applications; it changes the time of voting on election day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. to 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thus, making it impossible for traditional day-shift workers to vote before work or to vote after work on election day. This stringent contraction of voting access is part of a broader nationwide legislative onslaught masterminded by the GOP legislators after losing the 2020 presidential election. In majority Black counties in the suburbs of Atlanta, the number of drop boxes have been reduced from 33 to nine. There is a renewed worry about the expansion of the power of the State Legislature over elections because this could mean nullifying votes from predominantly Black counties like Gwinnett and Fulton (Fausset et al., 2021). In 2018, many Black Georgians were purged out of voter rolls and many others faced extremely long lines to vote in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Analyzing specific aspects of previous voting laws in Georgia revealed that those pertaining to voter registration and the purges of voter rolls disproportionately impacted Black communities. Voter registration systems have been considered one of the most significant aspects of voting that needs improvement in many states. Obstacles in voter registration limit voting access for many Americans. It also makes it difficult for election officials to audit elections and communicate with voters (Ansolabehere et al., 2010). One specific way that voter registration limits voter participation is the prerequisite for identification and documentation at the polls, as these policies disproportionately impact Black voters. These laws are generally based on claims of voter fraud, but nonpartisan studies have shown that voter fraud occurs in less than 0.00002% of votes cast, and that voter fraud prevention measures disproportionately affect people of color (Boylan, 2020). Historically, there are aspects of voter identification laws that are unknown (Barreto et al, 2007). More recent voter identification laws, however, appear to impact participation rates as well as election outcomes. One survey over nine years showed that voter ID policies, and especially "strict photo ID policies, have a suppressive effect on participation" (Darrah-Okike et al, 2020).

Voter "purging" is another form of voter suppression. This is the practice of removing voters from registration lists. The stated purpose for these purges is "keeping them up-to-date." In reality, these purges often lead to a massive "number of eligible, registered voters losing their right to cast a ballot" during elections (Brater, 2018). Stacy Abrams, a politician, lawyer, voting rights activist, in congressional testimony noted that in the State of Georgia,

1.4 million people were purged between 2010 and 2018. Half a million were purged in a single day in the State of Georgia. That should raise alarms for anyone, because the reality is when you show up to vote, and you are told that you cannot cast a ballot because you have been removed from the rolls, even though you know that you should not have been, you are now called upon to become your own attorney, to argue with who

is likely a volunteer that you have the right to vote. And if you happen to be in one of those hyper-suppressive communities, that ability may be quashed (Stacy Abrams quoted in *Continuing Challenges to the Voting Rights Act*, 2019).

Georgia, like many other states is not seeking to actively register new voters. On the contrary, they purge eligible voters from the voter rolls if election officials cannot match their voter registration information. This presents a problem because the computer match processes in many states is unreliable and inconsistent. “Between 15% and 30% of all match attempts fail because of typos, administrative errors, and minor discrepancies between database records such as a maiden name in one record and a married name in another or a hyphen in one record and not in another. ‘No match, no vote’ policies can block hundreds of thousands of voters through no fault of their own” (Weiser et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, following *Shelby County v. Holder*’s decision, the public no longer has access to proposed voting laws and policies for preview before they take effect. Proponents of Georgia’s SB 202 argue fervently that, “the changes made in this legislation in 2021 are designed to address the lack of elector confidence in the election system on all sides of the political spectrum; to reduce the burden on election officials; and to streamline the process of conducting elections in Georgia by promoting uniformity in voting.” (SB 202, 2021). The actual intent and potential impact of this legislation, appears vastly different from these stated intentions.

Voter enfranchisement in Colorado

While it is important to describe the various forms of voter suppression tactics carried out by states like Florida and Georgia to raise awareness and find solutions to counteract them, it is vital to highlight modern voter enfranchisement laws. For this paper, Colorado was chosen as an exemplary illustration because its electoral laws are a model for contemporary enfranchisement for other states to emulate. According to its voting laws, all voters automatically receive a mail-in ballot when they register to vote. Thus, it is the voter’s prerogative to decide whether to mail their ballot or to vote in-person. As a result, 99 percent of Coloradans typically vote by absentee ballot. For first-time voters voting by mail, there is an extensive list of alternatives to standard state photo identification card which include: Medicare/Medicaid card, student identity card, birth certificate, tribal identity card, valid employee card, etc. (Blake, 2021). In short, they basically want registered voters to authenticate their identities at the polls with any basic paperwork that identifies them. Although Colorado has fewer days of early voting (15 to 20 days) compared to some states disenfranchising voters, its voters hardly need many more days to vote since most of them vote by mail-in ballots. Their ballots are returned in the mailbox or in secured drop boxes outside a building. Coloradans hardly ever wait in line on election day as opposed to those in states like Georgia and Florida. Since their secure drop boxes are located outside a building, ballots can be dropped off at any time during early voting and on election day before 7 p.m. The state of Colorado has made voting more accessible for its citizens and that should explain why the state is consistently ranked one of the best in voter turn-out in local and national elections (Bonica et al., 2020). The voting legislation in Colorado is an example for electoral reform advocates. Adult education programs should not only teach about voter disenfranchisement, they should also share model enfranchising laws that students can relate to and can draw upon to solve voter suppression problems.

Adult education programs should not only highlight examples of voter disenfranchisement but also share model enfranchising laws that students can relate to.

Consequences of suppressive voting laws

The recent election law in Georgia, also known as Election Integrity Act of 2021 owes its antecedent to the *Shelby County v. Holder* Supreme Court ruling. It is regarded by voting rights experts as a machination to make it easier for state officials to create policies and practices that disenfranchise Black voters. A good example of the consequences of the aforementioned ruling is that 1,000 polling stations have been eliminated across the country in predominantly Black communities. Research shows that changing polling locations and limiting voting hours reduce voter turnout.

In recent congressional testimony on the voting laws in Georgia Stacy Abrams stated,

...I want to reiterate this false connection that is being drawn between voter turnout rates among communities of color, and voter suppression. These are not correlated. One can have intentional laws and practices to discriminate against voters and have a concomitant effort by communities that care about these issues to push back and to provide access. I am a part of a long legacy of people who have responded to oppression by making certain that we overreact, and that we overperform, but we cannot ignore the fact that that discrimination still exists. Discrimination doesn't cease to exist simply because there are those who are willing to fight back. That fighting back should demonstrate how important it is to eliminate the discrimination on its face (House Hearing, 2020).

Today, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Black people to vote in some states. The fact that an increased voter suppression has triggered an unprecedented voter turnout in the Black community, should not nullify the fact that there are voter suppression laws that people have had to overcome in order to vote. For example, in the 2020 presidential and senatorial elections, some Georgians queued up for six to ten hours to vote (Levine, 2020). Eliminating opportunities for early voting is one example shown to negatively affect the participation of Black and Brown voters who take advantage of this option to exercise their civic responsibilities, given that many of them do not have flexible work schedules. These foregoing examples of voter suppression forcibly suggest that politics is dynamic; so too is political knowledge. Therefore, adult education should prepare students with cutting-edge knowledge of these hideous changes and how to effectively counteract them when they are oppressive.

Implications: Resisting voter disenfranchisement

In countries where the electoral processes are fraught with major irregularities, there is often post-election violence. In order for the United States to consolidate its global position as the leader of the free world and exemplar of modern democracy, it has to strive for an inclusive electoral process from voter registration to the proclamation and certification of the results of the elections. In a democracy, education is critical in the electoral process from the start to the end. First, the 2020 presidential elections demonstrated that U.S. citizens are vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation (Pérez, 2020). Democracy works best when informed citizenry actively participate in the electoral process. Education has been determined to be an important indicator of voter turnout (Filer et al., 1991). There is a strong need for adults to redouble efforts to stay informed and be analytical about the history of voting rights in the United States and the contemporary efforts to suppress the votes of historically marginalized people. As Wolfe-Rocca (2020) writes about the history of minority disenfranchisement in the U.S., he argues that “the right to vote has always been incomplete,

contested, and compromised by racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia of policymakers and the interests they act to protect.” Adult educators have to be critically informed about voter suppression tactics in order to protect and defend the achievements of previous generations of civil rights activists. The Zinn Education Project (www.zinnedproject.org) has useful instructional resources that educators can use to teach students about U.S. history and voting rights. The Brennan Center for Justice is another non-profit, non-partisan institute at New York University that does great work in equal justice, rule of law, human rights, election integrity, and defense of American democracy. It has a wealth of information on voting laws and voter suppression tactics that can help educators and adults learn how to defend their votes and U.S. democracy.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, several studies “have found that voter turnout increases as educational attainment rises” (Filer et al., 1991 p. 386). Indeed, the relationship between education and voting has shown to grow stronger over time (Filer et al., 1991). Given that more education leads to more interest to vote in elections, adult educators should strive to teach the history of voting rights as well as instill the values of voting and participatory citizenship in adult learners. An informed and engaged citizenry would better resist voter suppressions through public debates, litigation, and ballot initiatives. They would mobilize the general population to go to the polls to elect candidates who will protect and expand voting rights for a healthy democracy.

Differences in voter turnout by race might be explained with variables like income, educational access, and the quality of education received (Filer et al., 1991). However, it is worth noting that not all education yields greater civic engagement and voting. The type and quality of education matters a lot. In recent years, the 2020 election notwithstanding, we have seen falling political engagement despite rising education levels in the U.S. (Campbell, 2006). An education that fosters critical thinking skills, addresses equity issues, and emphasizes experiential learning, especially in civic education, is likely to have a greater impact on the degree of civic engagement than the traditional classroom-bound education. As Myrna Pérez, the Director of the Voting Rights & Elections Program at the Brennan Center for Justice noted during a testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives,

...education efforts from trusted sources can be immensely helpful for motivating and encouraging voters and combatting incorrect information. This education should be culturally competent, in language, and targeted to low information voters and work for voters who do not get their information online. Education methods should include mail, telephone, trusted community leaders, radio, and television (2020).

While these types of education efforts should occur at the primary and secondary levels, there is

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a unique need for civics-oriented adult education. Studies have revealed that the distinct experience of adults in the U.S. face specific problems that contribute to the lack of voting (Summers et al., 2017). One of these unique areas are literacy and media access. Research has revealed that 42% of Americans read at basic or below basic levels (Summers et al., 2017). Research also shows that voluntary adult education courses may foster civic skills that promote political participation, and that

political engagement is a competence that should be developed by adults. Non-formal adult education does not appear to significantly impact adult voter turnout in federal elections (Busse et al., 2019). Our research indicates that there is a significant lack of adult education programs that focused on civic engagement and voting in the United States.

Any adult education curriculum that does not incorporate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, robust civic education, and equity issues within the context of experiential learning would be derailing students from becoming well-rounded citizens of the United States and the world. Although education can impact civic engagement, it is essential there be a focus on civic skills that offer opportunities for students to acquire critical literacy, as well as study and analyze socio-political issues through active participation in community service.

Not enough is known about the impact of adult education for civic engagement and voting. There are, however, reasons to believe that adult education could positively impact civic engagement and voting (Campbell, 2006). This is based on evidence that education contributes to “civic literacy,” which could combat all forms of voter suppression. Adult education, according to recent studies, increases political knowledge and interest, which are precursors to greater political engagement (Campbell, 2006).

Conclusion

While the U.S. constitution guarantees voting rights to all U.S. citizens of voting age, there are several states, especially in the South, which have persistently made it difficult or impossible for Black people to vote. There are politicians who are still trying to curtail the voting rights of Black Americans. While racism today may be veiled, passive, and less physically violent, it is still manifestly detrimental to the sociopolitical and economic wellbeing of Black citizens as well as to the entire nation. Denying people’s basic right to vote is tantamount to denying them their citizenship and their humanity. It is tacit racism. Adult educators and adult learners need to defend their rights by educating themselves about the history of voter disenfranchisement and the contemporary efforts to water down the Voting Rights Act so as to return to the perennial strategy of disenfranchising Black people. There is a need for critical literacy and civic engagement skills to be acquired by adult learners to overcome electoral roadblocks. While more transformative educational skills are necessary to instill critical consciousness in adult learners, there is also a heightened need for effective praxis on their part. In addition to teaching about inequities and social justice issues in the classroom, there has to be a service learning component woven into the curriculum to ensure that adult learners are acquiring experiential knowledge to enhance citizenship education. Moreover, civic engagement and critical literacy would mean some of the suppressive voting bills could be better understood and mitigated before they disenfranchise Black voters. It also means the adult students could run for office on equity and inclusive platforms as well as vote for candidates who share such values.

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