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Michigan lawmakers must reject effort to suppress voting rights

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BY SUE SMITH AND DIANA KASDAN

This week, the State House is slated to vote on a package of bills that would make it harder to register to vote, receive a ballot and cast a ballot on Election Day. While other state legislatures across the country have enacted a wave of suppressive voting laws, Michigan can do better. Michigan lawmakers should stand up for voters and reject these measures.

The bills — S.B. 751, S.B. 754 and S.B. 803 — are part of Secretary of State Ruth Johnson’s “Secure and Fair Elections” plan. But they don’t make elections any safer, and they are unfair to voters and community-based groups that help them register. By enacting these laws, Michigan would join a dubious list of states moving backward on voting rights and running afoul of core federal and constitutional protections.

For example, ever since Florida enacted a slew of new restrictions on voting and registration, it has been embroiled in two cases challenging the legality of its law under the U.S. Constitution and federal voting rights laws. In the most recent development, a federal judge blocked Florida from enforcing key provisions that have been crippling voter registration drives in the state.

U.S. District Judge Robert Hinkle held that these restrictions likely violated both federal voting law and the Constitution. In his ruling, he emphasized that “speech and voting are constitutional rights of special significance; they are the rights most protective of all others,” and “allowing responsible organizations to conduct voter-registration drives — thus making it easier for citizens to register and vote — promotes democracy.”



Michigan legislators should not follow Florida’s path. S.B. 754 would undermine democratic participation by imposing a number of unnecessary restrictions on groups like the League of Women

Voters of Michigan and others that help citizens register to vote. The law would require such groups, even those that have been running drives for decades, to attend mandatory, state-approved training sessions before they can register voters. But the law provides no guarantees that these trainings will be widely available.

Additionally, volunteers could not participate in drives unless they sign forms threatening them with criminal prosecution for registration offenses that are not clearly defined. As Judge Hinkle explained in blocking a similar requirement in Florida's law, this can have "no purpose other than to discourage voluntary participation in legitimate, indeed constitutionally protected, activities."

If Michigan lawmakers want to address a real election problem, they should improve our ramshackle voter registration process and help get more than 2 million eligible, but unregistered, Michiganders on the rolls. Michigan has in the past shown leadership on election reforms – it was one of the earliest to allow voter registration at DMVs, even before the national "motor voter" law passed in 1993.

Advances in technology offer even greater opportunities to enhance registration in Michigan. The Brennan Center for Justice has detailed successful models for modernizing voter registration that have worked in other states and can work for Michigan. By deploying existing databases, the state could accurately and automatically register the vast majority of eligible citizens to vote at much lower costs than the current paper-based system.

Rather than passing anti-voter laws and cracking down on groups that support voter participation, lawmakers should focus on these practical solutions and restore Michigan's legacy of moving forward, not backward.

Sue Smith is President of the League of Women Voters of Michigan, and Diana Kasdan is counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice.