

LONG ISLAND / HISTORY

Fear, anger and a call to action: 8 Llers speak out on plans to restrict voting



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Proposed legislation in at least 27 U.S. states that would restrict voting has reawakened fears and anger among Long Island civil rights activists who have spent their lives fighting for that democratic right. The bills also are a call to action for a younger generation to follow in the steps of those who joined the battle during the civil rights movement, some as youths in the Deep South.

If the more than 250 pieces of legislation become law, they would impose stricter identification requirements on absentee voters in some places, such as requiring Social Security numbers; impose civil or criminal penalties on elections officials making unintended errors; and allow any citizen to conduct a biased election audit, according to the Brennan Center for Justice in Manhattan.

Many of the proposed restrictions are the result of former President Donald Trump's bogus claim — which lacks legitimate evidence, election experts note — that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

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Newsday interviewed eight Long Islanders — from an outspoken civil rights lawyer, to activists in their 70s and 80s who continue to push for equality, to millennials unborn when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed — to gauge their views on the challenges facing voting rights today.

Here are their voices:

Bernice Sims grew up in Meridian, Mississippi, where she became involved in the NAACP as a young teenager in 1963 and witnessed pivotal moments in the civil rights movement.

Now in her 70s and living in Mineola, Sims recalled picketing businesses in her hometown that would not hire Blacks. "Medgar Evers was very concerned, after spending years in the military, to come back to his home to find out a lot of Black people didn't have jobs," she said of the NAACP's field secretary in Mississippi, who was assassinated in 1963.

She also became involved in helping to register Blacks in Mississippi to vote before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed.

"That all started around 1963 because also coordinated with that was the work of Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer was involved in the Delta area and her issue was to try to get as many people as possible registered and voting in Mississippi. And we had a very limited amount of people that was registered to vote." She added, "We went out to find locations where they would be amenable to have their church set up as a voter registration place."

Sims was a neighbor of James Chaney, a Black Mississippian who worked for the Congress of Racial Equality, who would be killed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964, along with two white men, Michael Schwerner, also a CORE worker, and Andrew Goodman, a Freedom Summer volunteer, both New Yorkers.

"My home served as a host family for the Freedom Summer workers coming down from the North from various schools. My home was a place they could come and get respite."

Sims remembers the date she last saw Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman alive at her home.

"When they came by, first of all, on June 21, they had two objectives: One was to introduce us to the new recruit. That was Andrew Goodman, Andy Goodman, as he wanted to be referred to, we were told. They also came by because they wanted to get my brother to go with them to Neshoba County, Philadelphia, Mississippi" to view the remains of a church burned down, presumably by the Ku Klux Klan. Her brothers weren't available, and Sims said she requested to go on the "mission." But Schwerner talked her out of it. "I lost the argument with Mickey Schwerner," she said using his nickname. "He said you're more needed in the office."

So, when Sims thinks about those monumental years, and the people, like her friends, who died to secure the right to vote for oppressed Black people in the South, she is incensed by what she views as voter suppression efforts today.

"I have relatives who fought in the First World War, fought in the Revolutionary War, that have fought in the Second World War, fought in Vietnam ... And they fought for this country, the right to have a say, and to have a voice. Do you think that with all of this voter suppression that they are going to prevent people from being able to vote? The more restrictions, the more creative the one that's being restricted against will be," she predicted. "People are not going to stop for this right. People are not going back."

"Voting in Charlottesville was something else," said Delores Quintyne, 88, recalling those years in her hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia, before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed.

"They would come and knock on your door. He said, 'Don't forget to register to vote, but you must vote Republican because Lincoln freed the slaves.' And I said, 'Boy oh boy.' So, then he talked to Mama. He said, 'You want to register to vote?' So, I looked at the text that they were giving out, and that's something that a college graduate would do," she said remembering what it was like in the 1940s, referencing literacy tests needed to pass to vote in that era, which affected her parents. "They gave them a hard time, but they end up registering anyway."

She added: "A lot of people at home didn't bother because of the poll taxes and the tests that they wanted them to take," she said. Literacy tests and poll taxes ended in Virginia after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a 1966 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, according to the Virginia Museum of History and Culture's website.

When Quintyne and her late husband, Irwin, moved to Amityville about 1961, they became active with civil rights groups in registering Blacks to vote on Long Island, particularly among workers on a Riverhead duck farm.

"What amazed me is that the people on Long Island, a lot of them weren't voters. They said they didn't want to vote because nobody does anything for them," Quintyne said. She said she told them: "You must vote. It's you that needs to vote. You have some power if you have some votes."

Now, Quintyne said: "I'm nervous about the future of voting rights, yes. We're already separated a little bit. I think it will separate us more if we don't get it passed ... We need to get the new Voting Rights bill together and we need to pass it. John Lewis [the late congressman] didn't do all that work for nothing. Something needs to be done about it. I don't know who can do it, but it needs to be done. I think the Senate and Congress [are] just making a big mockery out of democracy today. And they need to stop it."

Dorothy L. Goosby, 83, senior councilwoman on the Hempstead Town Board, grew up in Apalachicola, Florida, a small town nestled along the Gulf of Mexico. Voting was not easy there for African Americans, she recalled of the 1950s.

"My dad could not vote ... [He] never had the opportunity to go to school, so they would not let him vote because he couldn't read and write. My mom was able to vote ... Well, she did go through the literacy test ... And so she was able to vote because of that.

"As far as other people are concerned, many of them did not vote," she said of other Blacks. "Some of them were afraid to vote because of the jobs they had. They worked for white people, and some of them would not let them vote ... That was a big problem that we had in Apalachicola.

"I came to Long Island in the '60s, around '64. My husband [Anderson J. Goosby, now deceased] and I bought a house in Hempstead, where we still are, and raised our two girls there."

She became the lead plaintiff in *Goosby v. Town of Hempstead*, which changed how residents voted for town board members. Even though Blacks comprised 12% of the town's population in the late 1980s and early 1990, she said the town's original at-large voting meant "none of us could ever elect a person we wanted to represent us," she said of African Americans. The change from at-large voting to voting in six councilmanic districts, led to her election in 1999. She remains the only Democrat and Black woman ever elected to the board. "At least now, I have been able to make a difference for all of our people."

"*Goosby v. Town of Hempstead*, over 200 areas have used it in order to get some [representation] or get someone that they can depend upon," she said proudly.

The rollback of voting rights protections has her worried.

"There's no way we can live here without being able to vote. We must be able to do that. Otherwise, what are we?"

Long Island has its own voting rights history, and civil rights attorney Frederick K. Brewington, served as an attorney on the pivotal lawsuit — *Goosby v. Town of Hempstead* — filed Aug. 8, 1988, which challenged the town's at-large voting system.

The successful suit resulted in the court-sanctioned creation of six councilmanic districts, including one district that was primarily majority-minority.

"It took 12 years, and we went all the way up to the Supreme Court of the United States," Brewington, 65, said. "And what that did was that allowed, for the first time, a very large community of African Americans in the Town of Hempstead, which by the way, is the largest township in the United States, to be able to select and elect a candidate of their choice, and not have their vote basically diluted."

Another important voting rights lawsuit, Brewington noted, was *Jackson v. Board of Supervisors*, which upended the structure of Nassau County government, and created the County Legislature.

"Even though it was a voting rights case, it was also a constitutional challenge," Brewington said, with a federal judge ruling the county's Board of Supervisors form of government was unconstitutional because it violated the concept of one person, one vote because of a "weighted" voting structure that gave Hempstead Town two representatives on the board, while the two other towns and two cities got only one representative each.

Today, Brewington said: "Voting rights in the United States is under attack. From every hamlet and hillside, we are seeing attacks [taking] place to pull back and claw back those things that have been fought for decades and decades. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was probably one of the most important pieces of legislation ever voted on ... in the United States. What we're seeing now is backlash to those rights from state to state."

When Marvin Amazan of Hempstead reads about voting rights restrictions, he said the idea to him is "crazy" to do something that is a "basic right."

But the 28-year-old thinks about his newborn son, Marvin Jr., and how frustrating it is for people of color to continue to fight for voting rights, even though it was passed in 1965.

"I think about the work that I'm doing because he's just born and when he's 18 and he could vote, what will he have to deal with at that time?" Amazan said. "That frustrates my core to understand that 56 years and we're still dealing with the same stuff."

To Amazan "any voter suppression anywhere" has a chance to "impact us in a way that limits the representation."

Amazan, who works as a teaching assistant in the Uniondale School District where he went to school, speaks to junior high students about voting. He wants to be a mentor, like others were for him during his time spent after school.

"Those programs helped me understand that it takes a community to really raise the youth and just not one person," said Amazan, who started Wolfpack United, a social impact agency, which also engages with youth to coordinate local projects such as beautification. "If everybody is coming together toward a common goal then we can achieve more."

Amazan said the "frustration" that people have in regards to voting is why he feels hopeful.

"As long as we continue to educate and continue to stay engaged I feel like we can have a bright future in voting rights," he said.

For Justin Brown voting was a family affair when he went with his parents and grandparents to vote in Brooklyn. While Brown was a child at the time and didn't realize the importance of voting, he later did as an adult on Long Island when ran for a school board seat at the Uniondale School District and later for Nassau County clerk.

"That's always something I encourage where we have to come out and vote in droves," said Brown, 31, who now resides in Baldwin and works for the Institutional Review Board at New York City Board of Education. "We just need to get as many people as we can to vote because it definitely impacts us on a local level, on a national level and our everyday life."

As states are enacting strict requirements to vote, Brown said the move is another form of "segregation" to deter Blacks, like himself, and other people of color from voting.

"In my opinion, it affects directly only us, only the minority individuals," he said.

Brown doesn't believe the voting restrictions will be permanent because he sees the opportunities that lie ahead.

"Millennials, they're starting to buy homes and have families and the taxes and the burdens because of the legislation that's been passed; they see how it affects them," he said. "I feel like more people are going to come out and they're going to get more people to stay engaged, and if we get more people to stay engaged, then we'll get the right people in because we're going to ask the hard questions... And if they can answer and articulate and show through their actions that they have our concerns at heart, then we'll be able to get the right people in."

Alexis Taylor believes measures implemented in other states to limit how voting gets done is "targeted" which surprises her, she said, as local governments should be spending resources to get to people to cast ballots for elections.

"I feel like we're backpedaling," said Taylor, of West Babylon. "We should be extending more access and making it easier for people to vote, not harder."

Taylor, 22, a senior at the Fashion Institute of Technology, said limiting voting rights in minority communities "discourages them from voting. They might feel like their voice is not important or shouldn't be heard, but that's not the case."

In the 2020 presidential election, more Americans voted than ever, according to the United States Election Project. Turnout rates were higher among Blacks and Hispanics than the previous election cycle, according to the project.

"That minority is now turning into that majority," she said. "It's very important that we try to overcome those barriers so we can get out and get our voice heard."

Taylor, who works at Yung Hip Professionals, a Wyandanch-based nonprofit group dedicated to helping minority communities overcome poverty and injustice, said she remains hopeful for the future.

"I know that the people that I work around and the people that I know that are in my community, they're going to make sure that their voices are heard," she said.

As a Nassau County representative for the New York State Governor's Youth Council, Nicolette Carrion, of Baldwin, is working to help propose a state-mandated civic education curriculum to teach high school seniors how to vote. Casting a ballot was an opportunity she would miss.

"My birthday was four days after the presidential 2020 election so I sadly could not vote and that was a portion of the reason why I was motivating so many of my peers to vote and why I felt it was so important," said Carrion, who is a sophomore at Georgetown University.

Carrion, 19, said seeing other states' efforts to minimize how people in Black and Latino communities to vote is "disheartening" and "hard to reconcile with."

"It just further marginalizes and disenfranchises them," she said. "History shows that this has always been happening and it just gives them a reason to always kind of give up, feel shut out. And a lot of times the interesting thing is like, marginalized communities have so much already to focus on. They have to focus on their livelihood or their families or something else."

Carrion said she will continue to help others like her vote to eliminate systemic racism.

"This is a necessity to be involved to really make a difference and to really put our perspective on the table and to really work together so we can have a future," she said. "We can actually have something where everybody feels like they belong and there is equity, and we can eradicate so many systems of oppression that unfortunately has been plaguing us for so long."



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