



A menu of options to improve voting rights in Alabama

*By Stephen Stetson, policy analyst
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Alabama is famous around the world for our historic fights over equal access to the polls. Our entire democratic system depends on how elections are structured and who can participate. When barriers exclude people from voting, they often lose faith in a system that doesn't seem to value their voice in our society's decision-making process.

What proposals are in play?

Civil rights anniversaries and national media attention have placed increasing focus on voting rights issues in Alabama. Several legislative proposals have been advanced to expand access to voting and strengthen our state's electoral system. (*Bills with ** have received committee approval.*)

Several bills seek to restore voting rights to people who lost them. **HB 268****, sponsored by Rep. Mike Jones, R-Andalusia, and **SB 231**, sponsored by Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, would clarify which crimes are considered "crimes of moral turpitude" that permanently disqualify people from voting – and which ones aren't. Other bills that seek to streamline voting rights restoration include **HB 222**, sponsored by Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa; **HB 245**, sponsored by Rep. Thad McClammy, D-Montgomery; **SB 186****, sponsored by Sen. Linda Coleman-Madison, D-Birmingham; and **SB 293**, sponsored by Sen. Hank Sanders, D-Selma.

Several bills would ease voter registration. **SB 156**, sponsored by Sanders, would allow people to register on Election Day. Four other bills – **HB 72**, sponsored by Rep. Darrio Melton, D-Selma; **HB 149**, sponsored by Rep. Laura Hall, D-Huntsville; **HB 259**, sponsored by Rep. Mary Moore, D-Birmingham; and **SB 71**, sponsored by Coleman-Madison – would register people automatically when they apply for or renew a driver's license or non-driver ID card.

Other bills would allow more voting time or seek to prevent mistakes. **HB 163**, sponsored by Rep. Richard Lindsey, D-Centre, and **SB 302**, sponsored by Sen. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, would require counties to offer in-person early voting options. **HB 52****, sponsored by Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison, would require the state to notify absentee voters if a disqualifying mistake was made on their ballot so they can know not to repeat it. And **HB 303**, sponsored by Rod Scott, D-Fairfield, would require registrars to notify living voters who are being purged from the voter list.

What's the bottom line?

All of the above bills would improve the health of Alabama's elections and the responsiveness of those who serve in public office. In particular, establishing a clear and common-sense framework for people to regain voting rights after fulfilling the terms of their sentence would help ensure that everyone feels they have a chance to participate in our system of governance.