



2023

MISSISSIPPI VOTES

2023 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



I am thrilled to extend a warm welcome and present our Legislative Report, a comprehensive synopsis of our organization's impactful work during the past legislative session.

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to our remarkable team.

Our dedicated and passionate staff members have exhibited an unwavering commitment to our mission, and their efforts have been nothing short of exceptional. Together, we have made tremendous strides in advancing pro-democracy initiatives, and I am proud to say that our team was, without a doubt, badass!



AREKIA BENNETT-SCOTT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MS VOTES

The Legislative Report stands as evidence of our combined accomplishments, showcasing the noteworthy advancements achieved by Mississippi Votes and our distinguished coalition allies regarding several social justice matters. By means of persistent advocacy and community involvement, we have exerted great effort in promoting beneficial transformations in our region.

Within the report, you will find a comprehensive overview of the initiatives we championed, the legislation we supported, and the policy outcomes we achieved. Additionally, you'll discover the challenges we faced and the fight ahead.

Our work this past legislative session has been stronger than ever.

Our coalition partners have played an invaluable role in our success, and we extend our heartfelt appreciation to each organization that has stood with us. Together, we have forged strong alliances, amplified our collective voices, and achieved impactful outcomes for the communities we serve.

While we have made significant strides, our work is far from complete. We remain steadfast in our commitment to furthering social justice and upholding the principles of democracy, and we look forward to continued collaboration and advocacy in the future.

We are confident that the report will showcase the tremendous progress we have made, as well as inspire further collaboration and support.

Once again, thank you for your support and partnership. Together, we are making a difference, and I am immensely proud to lead an organization filled with such dedicated individuals.

If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. We look forward to continuing this incredible journey alongside you.

Dear Reader,

With another Legislative Session behind us, Mississippi Votes is here again to share its recap of major legislation that will potentially change the everyday lives of everyday Mississippians. This session in particular has been like no other where many basic principles of democracy have come under attack or completely ignored.



HANNAH BURNELL WILLIAMS
POLICY DIRECTOR
MS VOTES

This report is a comprehensive accumulation of our findings from the 2023 Legislative Session; an in-depth view of the policies and solutions to drive us towards the voter-friendly state we know Mississippi has the potential to become. This report will give some insight into how Mississippians can be a more active voice in the legislative process. Mississippi Votes will continue to educate Mississippians on how their voice matters beyond the ballot box.

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About Us

Our Mission

Mississippi Votes is an organization of intergenerational synergy centering and led by young people invested in the progression of Mississippi. We do this through our programming and outreach strategies that collectively empower young people, encourage civic engagement, and educate communities on voting rights through place-based grassroots organizing.

Our Vision

Our vision is to cultivate a culture of civic engagement throughout the state of Mississippi.

Our Values

We value the place, our people, and the context of our sacred work that centers the truth of our past to restoratively and regeneratively create a liveable, sustainable, and welcoming state for us and our futures.

- Inclusion: maintaining a board, staff, and volunteer base that reflects Mississippi's diversity
- Engagement: inspiring Mississippians to take an active interest in their state
- Collaboration: cooperating with organizations and groups to widen our outreach
- Empowerment: equipping Mississippians with the tools to effect change in their communities
- Innovation: developing new methods through organizing, data, and research to find creative solutions to existing problems

About Us

Our Programs

Voter Services

The Voter Services Program is designed to reach every segment of the electorate with a specific and keen interest in turning out the 18-35 electorate and developing the leadership of young organizers. The Voter Services Team is responsible for the design, implementation, and deployment of voter registration strategies, and outreach to targeted communities that aim to increase the voter turnout rate across the state. This team is also responsible for the public-facing tools that aid Mississippians in making informed decisions every election cycle.

Policy and Research

The Policy and Research Program of MS Votes is designed to advocate for the advancement of public policies that improve and broaden the electoral landscape of Mississippi. The Policy and Research Team works to democratize public policy by advocating for the expansion of voting access and modernizing Mississippi's antiquated voting laws.

Youth Civic Engagement and Leadership

MS Votes' leadership ecosystem produces the next generation of civic leaders in Mississippi. Each of our Youth Civic Engagement (YCE) programs close the gap in civic education, advocacy, and leadership development. MS Votes' core values include resourcing young people, centering them in the service of our work, and working alongside them as thought partners as we aim to create a more just society where our democracy thrives no matter who or what is on the ballot or in the legislature.

About Us

Our Programs

We offer four fellowship programs:

- **Democracy in Action:** A 10-month program that engages, enriches, and empowers young people attending Mississippi's colleges and universities. Democracy in Action Fellows are tasked with the grand responsibility of not just registering their peers to vote, but also engaging their peers in real ways that allow them to see themselves as part of the larger vision for democracy.
- **Emerging Leaders:** A 12-month grassroots, leadership development, organizing program for emerging leaders ages 18-35.
- **Youth Advisory Council:** This program is geared towards high school students, ages 14-18, as they lead civic engagement opportunities at their respective high schools.
- **One Girl One Vote:** This program is extended to queer, trans, gender nonconforming, and female-identifying individuals attending a college or university across the state. This fellowship is intended to breed data management geniuses and develop them into experts in policy creation and legislative processes.

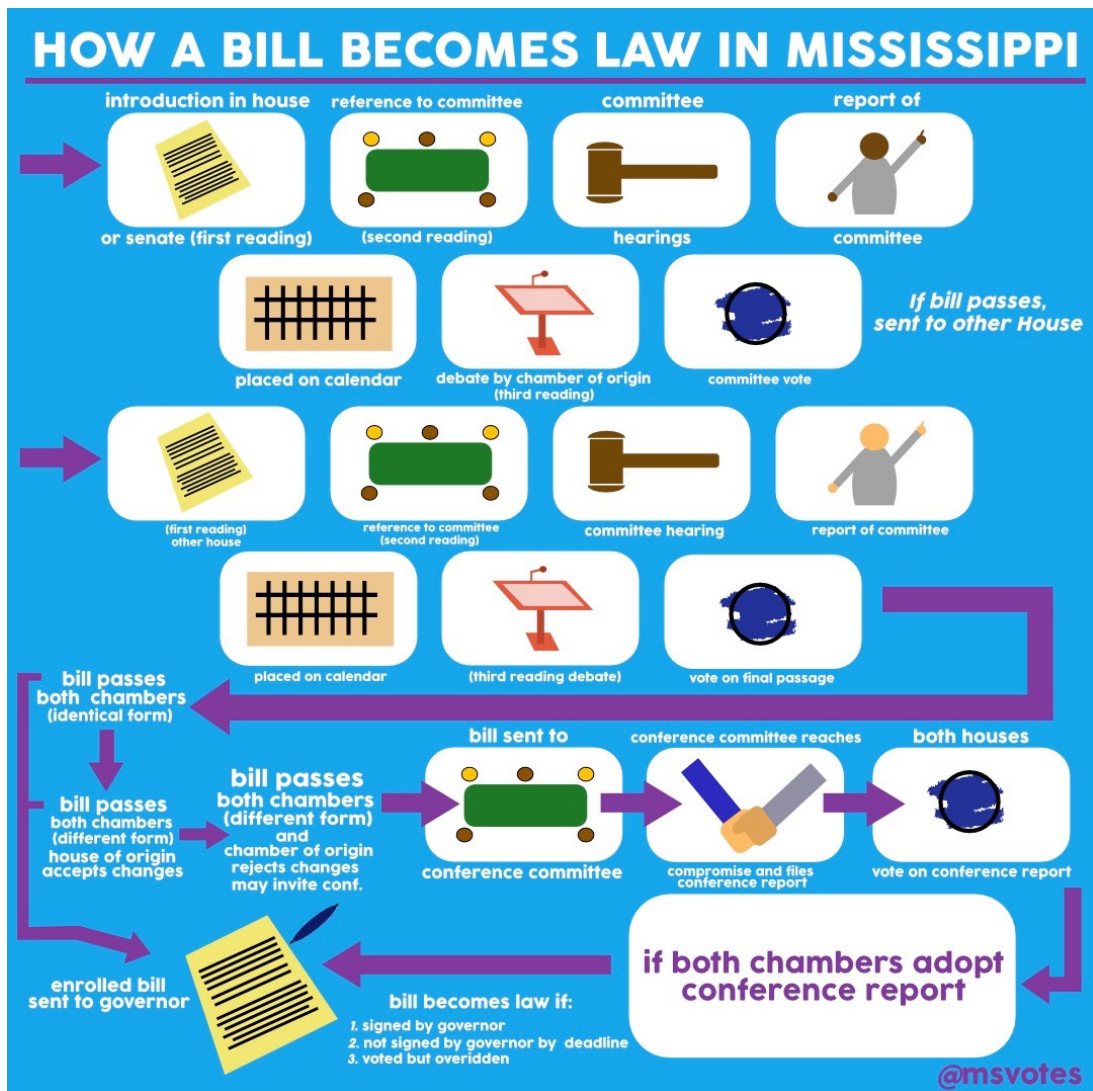


HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

1. The Bill is filed and sent to committee
 - a. No bill can become an act until it has been read on three separate days in each house. The first reading occurs when the bill is first introduced. Reference to committee immediately follows the first reading.
2. The committee considers the bill
 - a. The committees of each house meet and consider the bills that have been referred to them, which is the second reading. Committee members vote to approve the bill, amend it, or deny it. Bills not favorably reported are typically dead.
3. The bill is debated on the floor
 - a. Bills are listed on the calendar in the order they are reported by committee. When the bill is reached on the calendar, the bill gets its third reading. At this time, the whole house studies, debates, and amends the bill. Separate votes are taken on each amendment or change to the bill.
4. They VOTE
 - a. After the bill has been debated, each member votes. If a 51% majority of those present vote in favor of the bill, it passes. Otherwise, it fails.
5. Repeats steps 1-4 in the other chamber
 - a. If the second house makes changes to the bill, the bill is sent back to the house of origin for consideration of the amendment. If both chambers pass identical versions of the same bill, it goes to the Governor's desk. If the second house does not approve it in committee or it is not considered by the full house, then the bill is dead. If the bill passes in both houses but in different forms, the house of origin must accept those changes before it goes to the Governor's desk. If the bill passes but in different forms, the house of origin must accept those changes before it goes to the Governor's desk. If the bill passes but in different forms and the house of origin rejects changes, then the bill is sent to a committee.

HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

6. The Governor decides to sign or veto the bill
 - a. When the Governor signs the bill, it completes its enactment into law. If the Governor disapproves, it can be vetoed and returned to the originating house for consideration. The legislature can override a veto with a simple majority (51%) vote. A bill can also become law if it is sent to the Governor but is not signed by the deadline.



LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Since its inception, Mississippi Votes' Policy and Research team has monitored the Mississippi State Legislature alongside proposals, legislation, and bills about voting. As an organization that strongly believes in a "Voter Friendly" Mississippi, we put forth an agenda each legislative session to address the barriers of our antiquated voting process in the Magnolia State. These barriers include policies and practices that hinder turnout and discourage participation. These facts make Mississippi one of the least "Voter-Friendly" states in the United States. The purpose of the Mississippi Votes' Advocacy Plan is to break down the barriers that keep citizens from the polls by doing extensive research on voting policy and providing the public with both the knowledge and the means to advocate for healthy voting policies.

During the 2023 Mississippi Legislative session, Mississippi Votes monitored legislation closely and worked tirelessly with State Legislators to combat regressive proposals and advocate for processes that would expand civic participation. The 2023 Legislative session was like none other as there were a record amount of bills that would taint our already dated and inequitable voting policies. This document serves as an overall summation of Mississippi Votes' research, an understanding of this legislative session, and an overview of the ways state elected leaders voted on issues regarding elections and voting rights.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

9th day Wed. Jan. 11	Deadline for making REQUESTS for general bills and constitutional amendments to be drafted.***
14th day Mon. Jan. 16	Deadline for INTRODUCTION of general bills and constitutional amendments.*
29th day Tues. Jan. 31	Deadline for COMMITTEES TO REPORT general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OWN House.*+
38th day Thurs. Feb. 09	Deadline for ORIGINAL FLOOR ACTION on general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OWN HOUSE.*
39th day Fri. Feb. 10	Deadline for RECONSIDERATION AND PASSAGE of general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OWN HOUSE.*
42nd day Mon. Feb. 13	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OWN HOUSE.*
51st day Wed. Feb. 22	Deadline for ORIGINAL FLOOR ACTION on APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OWN HOUSE.
52nd day Thurs. Feb. 23	Deadline for RECONSIDERATION AND PASSAGE OF APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OWN HOUSE.
53rd day Fri. Feb. 24	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OWN HOUSE.
57th day Tues. Feb. 28	Deadline for COMMITTEES TO REPORT general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OTHER HOUSE.*+
65th day Wed. Mar. 08	Deadline for ORIGINAL FLOOR ACTION on general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OTHER HOUSE.*
66th day Thurs. Mar. 09	Deadline for RECONSIDERATION AND PASSAGE of general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OTHER HOUSE.*
67th day Fri. Mar. 10	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER general bills and constitutional amendments originating in OTHER HOUSE.*
71st day Tues. Mar. 14	Deadline for ORIGINAL FLOOR ACTION on APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OTHER HOUSE.
72nd day Wed. Mar. 15	Deadline for RECONSIDERATION AND PASSAGE of APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OTHER HOUSE.
73rd day Thurs. Mar. 16	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills originating in OTHER HOUSE.
74th day Fri. Mar. 17	Deadline to CONCUR OR NOT CONCUR in amendments from OTHER HOUSE to APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills, and for INTRODUCTION of LOCAL and PRIVATE bills that are REVENUE bills.
77th day Mon. Mar. 20	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER concurrence or nonconcurrence in APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills.
80th day Thurs. Mar. 23	Deadline to CONCUR OR NOT CONCUR in AMENDMENTS from OTHER HOUSE to GENERAL bills and CONSTITUTIONAL amendments.
81st day Fri. Mar. 24	Deadline for INTRODUCTION of LOCAL and PRIVATE bills that are not revenue bills.
82nd day Sat. Mar. 25	Deadline for CONFERENCE REPORTS on APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills to be filed.**+
84th day Mon. Mar. 27	Deadline for FINAL ADOPTION of CONFERENCE REPORTS on APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills**+, and for CONFERENCE REPORTS on GENERAL BILLS and CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS to be filed.**+
85th day Tues. Mar. 28	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER conference reports on APPROPRIATIONS and REVENUE bills.
86th day Wed. Mar. 29	Deadline for FIRST CONSIDERATION of conference reports on general bills and constitutional amendments.
87th day Thurs. Mar. 30	Deadline for FILING conference reports on general bills and constitutional amendments that had been RECOMMITTED for further conference.+
88th day Fri. Mar. 31	Deadline for ADOPTION of conference reports on general bills and constitutional amendments after RECOMMITTAL.
89th day Sat. Apr. 01	Deadline to DISPOSE OF MOTIONS TO RECONSIDER conference reports on general bills and constitutional amendments.
90th day Sun. Apr. 02	SINE DIE

DEFINITIONS

The following are issue areas that incorporate the fundamental beliefs of Mississippi Votes and prioritizes the voices and experiences of the young people native to our state. Below are definitions that will be used often throughout this report.

Voter Accessibility- The process in which individuals have fair and adequate access to the voting process. A restriction in voter access could include a voter roll purge, voter I.D. requirements, lack of polling places or updated machinery, and methods by which absentee ballots are requested and received are all variants of voter accessibility issues in the state of Mississippi. The state also has no vote-by-mail practices, strict early voting requirements, and also lacks other voter accessibility tools like ballot drop-off boxes or curbside voting. Mississippi Votes believes voting should be easy and accessible to all Mississippians whether they live on a college campus or in a rural area.

Voter Modernization- The process of updating the current voting and voter registration processes. Mississippi residents do not have access to online voter registration and automatic voter registration tactics are few and far between. By making voter registration available online, it will capture the attention and usage of the 18 - 21-year-old population. Mississippi's current voter registration process is to complete the voter registration form on paper and either mail or deliver the form to the circuit clerk's office in the county in which the citizen lives. Mississippi's Automatic Voter Registration process is currently only used at DMVs, and the service is poorly advertised as an option when getting a new Driver's License or State I.D. Mississippi Votes believes that Mississippi should implement Automatic Voter Registration at every state government agency. Automatic Voter Registration, specifically Backend Automatic Voter Registration, leaves no room for human error and facilitates a seamless process for everyone involved.

DEFINITIONS

Voter Suffrage - The process of obtaining voting rights as a United States citizen. Ordinarily, a citizen can register to vote at 17 and a half and cast their first ballot during the first election after their 18th birthday. However, in Mississippi, persons convicted of any of the state's 23 Disenfranchising Crimes permanently lose their voting rights unless they are restored in one of two ways: a.) full pardon by the Governor or b.) Legislative Suffrage Bill passage. A person seeking to regain their voting rights stands a very slim chance of either of these two options working in their favor. Mississippi Votes believes that all impacted persons who have gone to prison or jail, entirely served their terms, and have finished their probation or rehabilitation programs should be automatically eligible for complete restoration of voting rights without having to jump through hoops.

Voter Friendly- Generally describes a bill, a process, or a practice that allows the opportunity for voting access to be expanded and more accessible to every eligible voter.

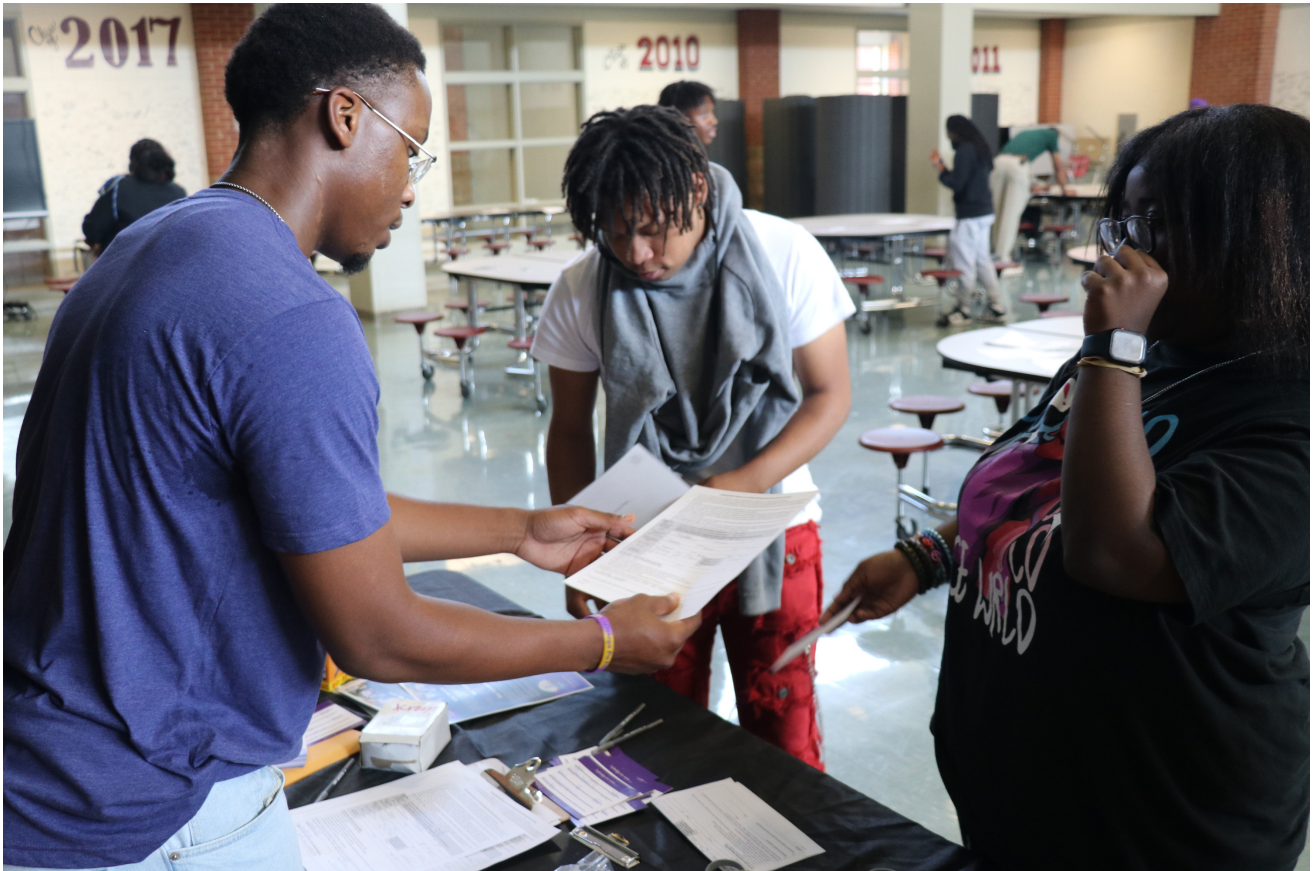
Voter Unfriendly- Generally describes a bill, a process, or a practice, that threatens or restricts voting access and its expansion to every eligible voter.

Ballot Initiative- A means by which citizens may propose to create, amend, or repeal a state law or constitutional provision through collecting petition signatures from a certain minimum number of registered voters. Successful initiative petition efforts result in the proposal being presented to voters within a state or other local government jurisdiction. Ballot initiatives are also referred to as ballot measures, popular initiatives, voter initiatives, citizen initiatives, and propositions.

DEFINITIONS

Voter Conference- A conference committee is a temporary, ad hoc panel composed of House and Senate conferees formed for the purpose of reconciling differences in legislation that has passed both chambers. Conference committees are usually convened to resolve bicameral differences on major or controversial legislation.

Amendment- The process of altering or amending a law or document by constitutional procedure.



MS VOTES' LEGISLATIVE STANDARDS

Mississippi Votes asks the following questions to determine whether or not a bill is considered voter friendly:

1. Does this bill help or hinder individuals that are at high risk of disenfranchisement? (citizens in rural areas, black and brown citizens, poor citizens, and college students)
2. Does this bill make it harder or easier for individuals to have access to polling places? (polling locations changes or restrictions)
3. Does this bill hinder or help voters cast their ballots? (voter ID changes, acceptable forms of voter ID, accessibility to affidavit ballots, and absentee voting)
4. Does this bill make it easier or harder for college students to be involved in the electoral process? (access to absentee voting, voter ID, access to voter registration)
5. Does this bill expand or restrict access to current voters? (voter purging)
6. Does this bill make it harder or easier for citizens to register to vote? (voter modernization, online voter registration, automatic voter registration)
7. Does this bill include relief to those who have been felony disenfranchised? (the restoration of voting rights, outlines clear voting rights restoration process, updates the voting rights restoration process)
8. Is this bill helpful or harmful to the intended structure of democracy in the state of Mississippi? (limits the voice of residents of the state of Mississippi)
9. Will this bill create legislation that provides for a more equitable and equal Mississippi?
10. Will this bill create legislation that provides for a more progressive and forward-moving Mississippi?

BILLS WE FOLLOWED

HB400

AN ACT TO REVISE AND INCREASE PENALTIES FOR CERTAIN ELECTION CRIMES

HB1310

AN ACT TO REVISE CERTAIN PERIMETERS AROUND ELECTION SECURITY AND LIST MAINTENANCE

HB1020

AN ACT TO CREATE THE CAPITOL COMPLEX IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

HB 1168

AN ACT TO REVISE THE USE OF CERTAIN MUNICIPAL SALES TAX

HB698

AN ACT THAT WOULD MAKE WATER BILLING SOLELY BASED ON USAGE AND NOT ANY OTHER METHOD

HB 370

AN ACT THAT WOULD ALLOW THE STATE TO REMOVE CITY LEADERSHIP THE SAME WAY THEY REMOVE COUNTY LEADERSHIP

HB 1068

AN ACT THAT WOULD ALLOW THE STATE TO CONTROL HOW THE \$450 MILLION FEDERAL DOLLARS ALLOCATED TO WATER SYSTEMS ARE SPENT

HR 24

AN ACT THAT REQUIRES THE HOUSE JUDICIARY B COMMITTEE TO PUBLICLY DISPLAY THEIR CRITERIA AND PROCESSES FOR APPROVING SUFFRAGE APPLICATIONS.

BILLS WE FOLLOWED

SCR 533

AN ACT TO REINSTATE THE
BALLOT INITIATIVE
PROCESS

SB 2889

AN ACT TO CREATE THE
CAPITOL REGION UTILITY
ACT

SB 2433

AN ACT TO ENSURE DIVERSITY
OF RACE AND GENDER IN
APPOINTED GOVERNMENT
POSITIONS

SB 2338

AN ACT TO ENSURE
TRANSPARENT WATER
BILLING IN MUNICIPALITIES

SB 2358

AN ACT TO BAN
BALLOT HARVESTING

DILUTING BLACK POLITICAL POWER

The Mississippi State Capitol Building is seated in the State's Capital City, Jackson, Mississippi. Every year, our non-regional legislatures travel to Jackson to carry out their duties in lawmaking. It is no secret that Jackson is the State's blackest city and Mississippi is the nation's blackest state, but with that static, it can be easily assumed that the city of Jackson experiences major underfunding, mostly to the detriment of the state. Our District Attorney, Public Defender's office, State Crime Lab, and even the Jackson Police Department have repeatedly asked the state legislators to consider reasonable budget increases so that attorneys can be adequately staffed and paid, the crime lab can process case-related testing at a higher volume and our police departments can offer better training to their recruits as well as better starting salaries, and every year those pleas have landed on deaf ears. Instead, Representative Thomas Lamar III of the 8th district proposed House Bill 1020, which was riddled with remnants of the old Jim Crow South.

House Bill 1020 at its core is a very dangerous piece of anti-democratic legislation that would directly remove power from the black voters of Jackson and cause public safety issues. House Bill 1020 would add a total of five (5) temporary, unelected, and unrelatable judges, at the discretion of the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court, for the 7th Circuit Court of Hinds County, with 3 hearing civil and criminal cases and 2 only hearing criminal cases. After a period of time, two (2) of these five (5) judges would be eligible to be elected. However, this would require redistricting of the circuit courts and raises concerns among the current sitting judges who are residents of the area and were elected by their constituents. Anti-Jackson Legislators have made it clear that these judges are to NOT be picked from Hinds County or any metro area county, saying that they only want the "Best and Brightest" and alluding to Hinds County not being able to provide that option. HB1020 would also allow for State Capitol police to have jurisdiction over the entire City of Jackson. This piece of legislation is clearly set to dismantle authoritative leadership in Jackson.

DILUTING BLACK POLITICAL POWER

HB1020 not only undermines the ONLY senior Black judge in the state, but it also keeps the Mississippi Public Safety Commissioner in control of Capitol Police. Not to mention, it would completely strip the Jackson Police Department (JPD) of its first responder responsibilities, making the department play understudy to the Capitol Police. The bill blocks much-needed funds from state agencies that could provide more resources for police, city judges, and Jackson Police.

PROBLEMATIC & ANTI DEMOCRATIC

The 2023 Legislative session again failed to deliver a cure for Mississippi's absent Ballot Initiative process. Senate Concurrent Resolution 533 was a problematic and anti-democratic piece of legislation that failed to reach a lot of people's radars. Although this bill promised to reinstate the people's right to petition for new laws, it also described issues that were banned from the initiative process. HCR 533 kept a lot of harmful ideas from its previous proposal HCR 24. Not only did the bill potentially require an impossible amount of signatures, the highest proposed being 260,000, but it also carried over the idea that the legislature would make a final decision on all ballot measures AFTER they have been voted on by Mississippians. Another issue this bill included was what type of issues could not be petitioned. This included Medicaid expansion-related policies, abortion rights, and rights restoration for those seeking to have voting rights returned after being convicted of a disenfranchising crime.

Auditing and list maintenance in recent years has included some questionable procedures offered by the Secretary of State's (SOS) office. Mostly these include how and when elections can be audited and the actions around voter purging. Previously the SOS has stood by having the right to audit elections in any county without explanation or reporting back to the state its findings.

PROBLEMATIC & ANTI DEMOCRATIC

Similarly, the SOS's stance on voter purging has been similar, abrupt, only giving voters 2 years to respond to a postcard after being inactive voters.

House Bill 1013 was no different from other auditing and purging bills.

However, amendments were added to enforce accountability among the SOS, making it mandatory that it reports back to the state in great detail why election audits were being performed and the reasoning behind what county was picked. Amendments were also added to give inconsistent voters more time to respond to active voter postcards, increasing the time from two election cycles to two federal election cycles and expanding the time frame from two years to four years and about four months. Mississippi is a state that has elections every year without fail. Some voters may not be able to make it to their polling locations every year or might experience hardships at their locations that may lower their motivation to vote in that election. The penalty should never be removal from the voter rolls.

MISSISSIPPI'S BALLOT INITIATIVE RESEARCH POINTS

Mississippi Initiative Process Research Findings

Based on research conducted by Lake Research Partners in October 2021 and EMC Research in October 2022.

Citizens trust the Ballot Initiative Process

- 85% of Mississippians think that ballot initiatives are a good way for voters to ensure the legislature knows what the public wants.
- Ballot measures allow Mississippi voters the freedom to have a say in the laws that govern. This process is vital to Mississippians. 72% of Mississippians polled say that the ability to pass laws via ballot initiatives is important to them—an overwhelming majority.
- Mississippi voters express confidence in voter-led ballot initiatives as methods of establishing laws (47%)
- 72% of Mississippi voters polled say the ability to propose and change laws via ballot measure is important to them.

MISSISSIPPI'S BALLOT INITIATIVE RESEARCH POINTS

Mississippi Voters Express Concern About Attempts to Make the Citizen-Initiative Process Harder

- Nearly 82% of Mississippi voters expressed concerns about the state legislature's ability to block, limit or reverse ballot measures after it is approved by a majority of the voters.
- A majority (59%) of Mississippi voters expressed concern about allowing the state legislature to block, limit or reverse ballot initiatives after it is approved by a majority of voters.
- A majority (55%) of voters expressed concern about allowing the state legislature to alter or change the language of a ballot measure after it is approved by a majority of voters.
- 72% of voters expressed concern that the state legislature is taking action to make it harder for voters to pass ballot initiatives.
- 69% of voters expressed concern that the state legislature is taking action to make it harder for voters to put measures on the ballot.
- Only 5% of voters say the process should be harder, compared to 45% who say it should be easier, and 35% who say the process should be reinstated as it was before the process was invalidated.
- 57% of voters strongly agree that politicians making it harder for voters to propose and pass ballot measures is unacceptable.
- 52% of voters said they were less likely to support their State Legislator if they knew they supported revising the ballot initiative process with changes that make it harder to place an issue on the ballot.
- When asked if reinstatement of the initiative process were to be included in the conversation surrounding the next election for Mississippi Governor, how important would this be in determining which candidate you would support, 31% of voters said it would be extremely important.

NO SUFFRAGE, NO PEACE

Every year, Mississippi Votes pledges to stand beside Mississippians impacted by the State Constitution of 1890's Felony Disenfranchisement laws. Over the course of a year, MSV seeks suffrage applicants ready to take on the task of trying to obtain their voting rights back.

This year Mississippi Votes submitted 70 applications to the House of Representatives with the assistance of Representative Summers. However, NONE of the applications we, our partners, or individuals submitted were granted approval.

This is not the first time in Mississippi's history that not a single application was passed, but it is the first time that this number of Mississippians have come forth and trusted the state legislature to act on their behalf, hoping for a positive result.

The suffrage process in Mississippi is very unclear and seems to have changing criteria with every session. Many legislators have tried to offer a solution to the messiness of the process, most of which include automatic restoration of rights in some form or another. This year Mississippi Votes had HR 24 drafted, which would require the Judiciary B committee in the house to make it known publicly exactly what it's process is for selecting applicants and restoring voting rights. Unfortunately, the bill died in committee.

Mississippi is one of less than 10 states that still adhere to permanent disenfranchisement due to the conviction of certain felonies. Through multiple polling and surveys conducted by the Policy and Research team starting in 2019, Mississippians feel that the current suffrage process is unclear and if given the chance would be interested in changing it.

We will not stop collecting, submitting, and fighting for the voting rights of impacted Mississippians.

LEGISLATOR OF THE YEAR

Rod Hickman is an attorney, community leader, and activist. His success has been an aggregated effort among my parents, educators, and religious upbringing. Through this community of individuals, a heart of service was instilled in me from a very early age.

He was educated in the Noxubee County District, K-12; he received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Mississippi and J.D. from the University of Mississippi School of Law, graduating magna cum laude.



SENATOR ROD HICKMAN
DISTRICT 32

Hickman started practicing law at one of Mississippi's leading law firms and in 2019 he moved home to Noxubee County to open a much-needed law firm in the community. In that same year, he was elected the first African American County Prosecutor in the history of Noxubee County. He serves as an adjunct prelaw professor at both Tougaloo College and Mississippi University for Women. He is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated where he currently serves as the Director of Legislative Affairs for the Mississippi Alpha Network.

Hickman is also a member of the local NAACP, the Noxubee County School District advisory council, and he coaches the Noxubee County High School Mock Trial team. In November 2021, he was elected to the Mississippi State Senate becoming the youngest current serving Mississippi Senator. He represents Mississippi's 32nd Senate District made up of Kemper, Lauderdale, Noxubee, and Winston counties. Hickman's greatest joy is being the father of Ari Elizabeth Hickman, his seven-year-old daughter. She keeps him busy with an assorted array of activities.

"I see a Mississippi that keeps our best and brightest. I envision a Mississippi that my daughter Ari will choose to not only be educated in but have a long and prosperous career and raise a family if she chooses. That's why I'm in the legislature and continue to fight for a better Mississippi. I'm working to see Mississippi and Mississippians live out their truest and greatest potential." -Senator Rod Hickman

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

The 2023 Mississippi Legislative Session has been one of the most monitored. This year it would seem as though the state set aside an anti-democracy and anti-municipality agenda. Mississippi Votes, along with several of its partners, have worked tirelessly to make sure that valuable information has been able to reach Mississippians in real time regarding potential policies that would have an immediate change on their day-to-day lives. The State of Mississippi has shown us this session its insatiable appetite to have complete power over its black residents and its black municipal leadership. Legislation like HB1020 has even been seen in other states that have high black populations in other cities. Mississippi also left this legislative session without a ballot initiative process again. Although many outlets have reported this as lazy work by our policymakers, stopping SCR 533 was crucial to ensuring real democracy was protected. Besides, what is the point of having a ballot initiative process if every important issue Mississippians care about is automatically blocked? What would be petitioned? The passing of zero suffrage applications also strikes as a major red flag. Denying individuals their right to suffrage based on a mysterious ideology is unacceptable. The state believes that not 1 out of 70 people deserves to have their voice heard at the ballot box. The 2023 session has sparked intensely proactive planning for 2024. We are prepared to offer, amend, justify, protest, and more to not only keep the principle of free and safe elections intact but also protect the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi Votes will continue to fight for an equal and equitable voting experience for ALL Mississippians.

STRATEGY

The Policy and Research team undergoes several stages each year in preparation for the legislative session. At the beginning of May, we begin to do preliminary research on the central policies we will advocate for as an organization. We collect quantitative and qualitative data to help guide our understanding of voter registration, voter turnout, and other measures of civic engagement in Mississippi. We compare data to the year prior and assess what is possible for the years to come. After gathering all the data and doing the necessary research, we analyze current law and state legislation to create a proposal. Our partners are integral in this process as we discuss potential policy proposals based on their impact on voter registration, turnout, and civic engagement. Once policy recommendations are finalized internally, we share our policy proposal with legislators and our supporters.

Mississippi Votes stuck to its core principles around voter education this year. The Policy and Research Team held a series of virtual Legislative Advocacy Days for students and community members that featured conversations with legislators and other stakeholders. These conversations were centered around how to effectively get involved with the Mississippi legislature and what everyday people can do to spread awareness about good and bad bills. They also covered how to find your legislators' contact information, navigate the Mississippi Legislature website, watch committee meetings on Youtube, and track bills in real-time. We were able to engage all ages of Mississippians across the state through these information sessions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hannah Burnell Williams is a 30-year-old native of Jackson, Mississippi, and a 2016 graduate of Jackson State University where she received a B.A. in History. She is currently attending Harvard University Extension School for a master's in Museum Studies. Hannah joined the Mississippi Votes team in 2019 as the Policy and Research Analyst where she leads the work in voting reform for pre-trial detainees and the restoration of rights for the felony disenfranchised. She also organizes student and community interaction with the Mississippi Legislature and directs the One Girl, One Vote fellowship.

Jarrius Adams is a 25-year-old native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and a 2019 graduate of the University of Mississippi where he received his B.A. in Public Policy and Political Science. Jarrius joined the MS Votes team in January 2021. He serves as the Policy & Research Associate. During his time with the organization he has worked on advocacy focused on online voter registration, electronic absentee voting, voter suffrage & rights restoration for the formerly incarcerated, alongside the legislature. He's currently a law student at Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C.

Henry Goss, Jr. is a 28-year-old native of Jackson, Mississippi, and a 2018 graduate of Jackson State University where he received his B.S. in Mass Communications with a concentration in Integrated Marketing Communications. Henry joined the MS Votes team in February of 2023 as the Communications Director where he leads the organization's marketing, advertising, and public relations efforts. He also facilitates the development of the MS Votes' "Up2Us" podcast which launches Fall 2023.



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