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# A Dual Disenfranchisement

How Voter Suppression Denies Reproductive Justice  
to Women of Color

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# Introduction and summary

A slew of recent voter identification laws are increasingly threatening the voting rights of people of color. This erosion of our most basic civil right comes alongside historic levels of attacks on reproductive health services. The two are not unrelated. Women of color stand at the crossroads of what is in essence a double disenfranchisement. When they are denied the opportunity to participate in civic life, they also lose the ability to voice their opinions and hold lawmakers accountable on the reproductive health issues that directly affect them.

In the 2011 general election, Mississippi voters rejected an extreme ballot initiative that would have granted personhood status to embryos and fetuses, which could have outlawed a number of common medical services for women, including popular forms of birth control, treatments for miscarriage and infertility, and abortion. In the same election, voters approved an initiative restricting the ability of Mississippi residents to vote by requiring unnecessary photo identification.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this completely unwarranted voter identification initiative, nearly 75,000 women of color may be prevented from voting in Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> Such a large number can have a significant impact on electoral outcomes: for instance, it takes only 89,285 signatures to place an initiative on the ballot in Mississippi,<sup>3</sup> not to mention that the margin of defeat for the state's personhood initiative was a mere 130,000 votes.<sup>4</sup>

Mississippi's voter identification law is just one example of the record number of voting restrictions that have been introduced and adopted throughout the country in advance of the 2012 election. But what Mississippi's 2011 election also teaches us is that the fundamental right to vote is only the first of many rights at stake.<sup>5</sup> Women of color, by losing the ability to express themselves on the issues that directly impact them, will lose their ability to protect a range of constitutional rights, including the right to decide whether, when, and with whom to have children.

Here is a brief rundown of the facts:

- Women of color compose 18 percent of the U.S. population
- Women of color have been voting at steadily increasing rates over the last 12 years
- In the last year, 34 new laws requiring photo identification to vote have been proposed; four will be in effect on Election Day 2012
- In the last year, 17 new laws requiring proof of citizenship have been proposed; two will be in effect on Election Day 2012
- On Election Day 2012, between 596,000 and 959,000 women of color may be disenfranchised by voter identification laws
- Beyond November 2012, between 1.05 million and 1.86 million women of color stand to be disenfranchised by voter identification laws
- Twenty-two states passed 61 new measures restricting women's reproductive health in the first nine months of 2012
- The House of Representatives voted 55 times on anti-woman measures in the 112th Congress

Voter suppression is not just a civil rights issue—it is a matter of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice stands at the intersection of traditional reproductive rights concerns and social justice issues and centers the reproductive health needs of the most marginalized populations, including women of color, low-income individuals, and individuals with disabilities, among others. It has been defined as “the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls, and will be achieved *when women and girls have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, sexuality and reproduction for ourselves, our families and our communities in all areas of our lives.*”<sup>6</sup>

This report will situate women of color in the United States today, their current electoral impact, and the methods being used to disenfranchise people of color throughout the country. Next, we determine how many women of color stand to be disenfranchised by these new methods. Lastly, we explore some of the histori-

cal regulation of women of color's reproduction along with present day attacks on reproductive health services to explain why it is crucial for women of color's voices to be heard on these issues.

Despite these voter suppression efforts that attempt to silence the voices of women of color, it remains imperative that they vote on Election Day to ensure that their interests are represented.

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