For retired teacher Willa Johnson, fired from her job for organizing students for voter registration drives in the 1960s, new anti-voting laws sweeping the nation hark back to an era she’d hoped gone with the wind.

Invoking the days of poll taxes and literacy tests used by Southern states to prevent Blacks from voting, Republican lawmakers across the country have enacted reforms that could prevent millions of Americans—particularly minorities, students, low-wage workers, and the elderly—from casting ballots in 2012.

More than five million eligible voters could be disenfranchised, experts estimate—more than enough to decide a close election.

It’s no coincidence, say Black voting rights activists, voter suppression tactics have made a comeback now, after the country elected its first Black president. After all, they point out, some of the same prejudices Willa Johnson encountered for daring to mobilize Black voters during the civil rights movement are alive today.

Johnson recalls the pervasive climate of fear and intimidation that made simply trying to vote an act of great courage. Blacks faced evictions, firings, foreclosures, and routine harassment; some were beaten and arrested on false charges, with reprisals sometimes directed against a would-be voter’s entire family. Poll taxes charged at the voting booth were beyond the reach of many poor Black families, while literacy tests required Blacks who could read to decipher the meaning of a passage to the satisfaction of the registrar. Many educators who took literacy tests were never notified of the results by registration officials.

Despite the risks, Johnson and fellow educators spearheaded historic voter registration campaigns. A former North Carolina elementary school teacher, Johnson recollects teaching her students how to register. “I got samples of the literacy tests and studied them as a class project. The kids went home and taught their parents,” remembers Johnson, who was called into the principal’s office and summarily dismissed. Defended by NEA, Johnson won a groundbreaking case around unfair teacher dismissals.

Just as the hostile political climate of the civil rights era spurred Blacks to launch voter registration drives, the current political climate has rallied today’s Black community, the majority of whom feel the president is doing the best he can in an often hostile, obstructionist environment.

“The racist rhetoric and total disrespect practiced by President Obama’s opponents have galvanized Black Americans,” declares Stan Oden, NEA member and professor of government at Sacramento State University. From the outrageous (the birther movement) to the ominous (a 400 percent increase in presidential death threats since Obama took office) to the just plain offensive (insulting remarks about the president, his wife, and his daughters), the entire Obama family has been a target.

Like the majority of Black voters, Oden believes race is the main engine driving such extremist reactions to the president. “When Obama became president,” he explains, “it shocked some people out of their reality. ‘How did this happen; were we asleep?’ To prevent a repeat, they’re making it harder for the president’s supporters to vote. All of these draconian anti-voting and anti-union laws are directly related to the fact that Obama was supported by people of color, young people, and labor unions.”

Our parents and grandparents suffered and sacrificed—some with their lives—for our right to vote, recalls Oden. “This latest attempt to steal that right should be a clarion call—not just to Black Americans, but all Americans.”
FROM ROCKING THE VOTE TO BLOCKING IT

IS THIS HAPPENING IN YOUR STATE?
“The new voting laws are the most significant setback to voting rights in this country in a century,” warns Judith Browne-Dianis, who monitors barriers to voting as co-director of the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization with a long history of fighting for fair elections.

Anti-voting reforms fall into several categories that vary by state:

Photo ID Laws. Fifteen states currently require voters to show a state-issued photo ID at the polls. Approximately 25% of African Americans, 18% of senior citizens, and 15% of workers earning less than $35,000 per year lack a current photo ID. Rural voters, some of whom must drive a 75-mile round trip to the closest DMV office, are also affected.

Restrictive Voter Registration Laws. A number of states have implemented burdensome restrictions on third-party registration organizations—driving many away from conducting voter drives in 2012. Florida requires voter registration groups to file registration forms within 48 hours of signature, or face stiff penalties. Texas requires anyone registering voters to take a mandatory training course and exam and fords anyone who is not a registered voter in Texas from registering others. Maine and Ohio have eliminated the right to register on Election Day.

Early Voting Limitations. Some states have passed laws limiting early and absentee voting, with Florida and Ohio nearly cutting the number of available days by half. In Florida, where Black churches organized a “Souls to the Polls” early voting event, Sunday voting has been eliminated.

Anti Ex-Felon Voting Laws. Thirteen states permanently disenfranchise convicted felons, disproportionately affecting poor, minority males. States didn’t prevent felons from voting until the eve of the Civil War, when 80 percent initiated the practice, largely to deter African Americans. Most democracies give ex-offenders the same voting rights as other citizens.

Voting Disinformation/Deception. Tactics ranging from phone calls and mailings with misinformation about polling locations and times, election-day phone jamming, and voter-roll purges, often target minority voters.

Unequal Election-Day Resources. Because U.S. elections are funded on the local level, underfunded communities disproportionately experience longer lines and malfunctioning equipment.

HOW TO FIGHT BACK!
Even if you’re not affected personally by these policies, someone in your family, school, or community may be. Here’s how you can take action:

■ Be vigilant—know what’s going on in your state. Even if your state doesn’t currently have anti-voter initiatives, new voter requirement bills may surface in the 2012 legislative session.

■ Make sure your voter registration is up-to-date. Voters have gone to the polls only to discover they weren’t on the registration rolls. Visit your state’s website to check the deadline and find out whether your name is on the list of registered voters. Even if you’re listed, print the page and keep it as proof.

■ Understand the process. Getting the proper identification in your state can be a lengthy, convoluted process that involves multiple steps. When Browne-Davis secured a photo ID for her 81-year-old mother-in-law, she experienced the obstacle course many voters will have to navigate this year.

■ Go to educationvotes.org to get more information, learn about calls to action in state battles, and find out ways you can help ensure all voters have a voice in 2012.

■ Call election protection hotline 1-866-OUR-VOTE to report problems.

■ Report misinformation and deceptive practices to ap@advancementproject.org.

■ Contact Rock the Vote or the United States Student Association if you’re a college student. Young people vote at a lower rate than older voters due to registration impediments combined with a lack of experience.

The bright light in this battle, notes Browne-Dianis, is that we’re educating voters of all races and invigorating them to participate in the electoral process. She urges labor unions and civil rights organizations to connect the dots between their shared issues and work together on a big-picture strategy.
Sources (listed in order of appearance)


