

Testimony of Stosh Cotler
Chief Executive Office, Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice
Submitted to

The Senate Committee on the Judiciary

For the hearing record on:

“The Voting Rights Amendment Act, S.1945: Updating the Voting Rights Act
in Response to *Shelby County v. Holder*”

June 25, 2014

Almost exactly fifty years ago, three young men were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi for working to register African-Americans to vote. Today, we work to carry on Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner’s fight to defend the voting rights of all Americans. Inspired by their legacy, I submit this testimony for the record of this hearing, thank you for giving the Voting Rights Amendment Act of 2014 the consideration it deserves and urge you to pass this important bill. The landmark protections of the Voting Rights Act are critical and must be reinstated by Congress before the midterm elections this fall.

There is something quintessentially American, but also quintessentially Jewish, about voting. After all, voting is a ritual, part of belonging to the community. American Jews have always valued our right to vote. As our ancestors fled pogroms and persecution, those who came here found a country where they, even if they were not always welcome or even fully protected under the law, nonetheless had a legal right to exist, pursue their own affairs, and be part of our political system at the basic level.

We draw inspiration not only from our ancestors, but from the Jewish leaders of our time—those who marched on Washington, those who participate in election protection today—and from our sages of old. “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted,” (Babylonian Talmud, B’rachot 55a) our rabbis taught, and in our nation, that means the full diversity of our citizenry has the unhindered right to vote for their leaders.

Yet, while voting rights have long been—and continue to be—a personal issue for the Jewish community, this is true for the broader interfaith community as well. To illustrate this, I submit for the record two letters in support of the Voting Rights Amendment Act on behalf of the myriad diverse signers. The first, a Jewish community letter, was signed by dozens of Jewish organizations and the second was signed by 88 faith-based organizations representing more than a dozen religious denominations.

In striking down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court’s 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* dismantled critical protections for

330 seventh avenue
19th floor
new york
new york
10001
212.213.2113

www.bendthearc.us

 @bend_thearc

 bendthearc

those most at risk of having their rights abridged. It took mere weeks after the ruling for many of the jurisdictions previously monitored under the VRA to rush out and make changes to election law that could deny the vote to thousands of citizens. The reasons for these changes may or may not be as blatantly racist as they were fifty years ago, but they are certainly just as cynical and malicious. Many proponents have been clear that their motives are based on suppressing votes to win partisan election contests. Yet, even ignoring the motives, the results of these changes are clear—they will make it harder for communities of color, women, first-time voters, the elderly, and the poor to cast their vote.

Yesterday, Bend the Arc and our supporters delivered a *yahrtzeit* candle (a memorial candle lit by Jews to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's passing) to every member of Congress. Emblazoned with the faces Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner, it is our hope that these memorial candles help ensure that these brave young men are not forgotten and that our elected officials honor their memory—and that of so many others like them—by passing the Voting Rights Amendment Act of 2014. It is clear that our work is far from complete. It is clear we still need the Voting Rights Act.