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The Commonwealth of Kentucky Takes an Important Step in Protecting Democracy

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Abstract

In this editorial, Northern Kentucky University's president celebrates Kentucky's new bipartisan voting rights bill. Signed into law in April 2021, the legislation runs counter to trends in other states by expanding, rather than restricting, voting options in the Commonwealth. As an immigrant to the United States from India, the author brings a unique perspective on American democracy and expresses his passion about higher education's critical role in informing students about their civic responsibilities.

Keywords: voting rights, democracy, civic engagement

Springtime in Kentucky usually means March Madness and Derby days. This spring, however, we witnessed something refreshingly new—a bipartisan effort to expand voting rights. In April 2021, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear signed into law [House Bill 574](#), which dramatically expands voting rights in what remains one of the most restrictive states in the United States.

As president of one of Kentucky’s public universities, I was delighted to see representatives of the Commonwealth collaborate in a bipartisan manner to reform its election laws. The bill passed 91-3 in the state House and 33-3 in the state Senate before moving to the governor’s desk. Given Kentucky’s legislative make-up, this meant that Republicans took the lead and Democrats, including the governor, supported the effort.

Aside from the importance of the legislation, the bill’s passage was a breath of fresh air during a time of great division and a welcome contrast to the partisan election “reforms” being enacted in other states. In fact, this bill was developed by legislative sponsors in partnership with the bipartisan State Board of Elections, the bipartisan Kentucky County Clerks Association, and the Republican Secretary of State, Michael G. Adams.

Voting is a right and a privilege all Americans enjoy, and not every place in the world allows this freedom. I believe democracy has produced more desirable results for nations than any other system of government. Kentucky’s voting-rights bill is an important step in solidifying that right for all and includes several important provisions such as no-excuse early voting for the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday before an election. It also creates a permanent online portal for voters to request absentee ballots and track them once they have been submitted.

Since 2002, Northern Kentucky University (NKU), through its Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement, has been preparing the next generation of informed and engaged citizens to sustain our democracy. Our “I Count Because I Vote” campaign provides an online guide for students on voting. We also welcomed freshmen to campus in the fall of 2020 with masks that read, “VOTE”—a reminder of their right (and responsibility) as 18-year-olds. Thanks to these and other efforts, NKU students register and vote at higher rates than students at peer institutions.

Because this cause is a priority in the community as well as on campus, NKU is an active partner in the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce’s “Get Out the Vote” initiative, which aims to make Northern Kentucky the top region in the state for voter turnout. The university also partners with the public library districts in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties to host the Northern Kentucky Forum, designed to connect our region through public discourse on local issues. Many of NKU’s faculty and staff participate in Kids Voting Northern Kentucky, which encourages parents to bring their children with them to polling places, where the kids can vote in a mock election as their parents vote in the real one. Each election cycle, NKU history majors volunteer to tabulate the Kids Voting results.

NKU is part of this cause nationally as well, through the American Democracy Project and the Campus Election Engagement Project, two networks with a combined membership of over 600 colleges and universities. Together, these institutions represent a current and continuing commitment to civic education—which only deepens our celebration of House Bill 574.

While much work remains, Kentucky’s bill represents great progress for the Commonwealth and demonstrates that bipartisanship is indeed possible in these fractious times. I

COMMONWEALTH TAKES AN IMPORTANT STEP

hope our state and all others continue the effort to expand and solidify voting rights for all citizens in the months and years ahead.

Author



Dr. Ashish Vaidya has served as Northern Kentucky University's sixth president since July 2018. Dr. Vaidya is responsible for championing the university's mission and core values, fostering a collegial and collaborative culture that capitalizes on the richness of the NKU community, and furthering its commitment to access and inclusive excellence. Dr. Vaidya continually challenges the university to become a more student-ready and regionally engaged institution. He took a unique approach to strategic planning when he launched the university's strategic framework, Success by Design, which outlines three pillars of student success: access, completion, and career and community engagement. Dr. Vaidya's extensive community work includes service on the boards of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland's Cincinnati Branch, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, among others.