

Springtime in Kentucky usually means March Madness and Derby days. However, we had something refreshingly new this spring— a bipartisan effort to expand voting rights. Last month, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear signed into law [House Bill 574](#) — which dramatically expands voting rights in what is still one of the most restrictive states in the United States. As president of one of Kentucky’s public universities, I was delighted to see the Commonwealth work 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 going to the governor’s desk. Given the legislative make-up in Kentucky, this meant that Republicans took the lead and Democrats, including the governor, supported the effort.

Aside from the importance of the legislation, it was a breath of fresh air during a time of great division and quite the contrast to the partisan election reforms we are seeing 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 we have as Americans, and not every place in the world has that option. I believe that democracy as a system of government has produced more desirable results for nations than any other form of government. This bill is an important step in solidifying that right for all and includes several important provisions such as no-excuse early voting for Thursday, Friday and Saturday before the election. It also creates a permanent online portal to request absentee ballots and to track ballots once they have been submitted.

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

Because we believe 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. And we are a partner with the public library districts in Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties to host the Northern Kentucky Forum, designed to connect our community through public discourse on local issues. Many of our faculty and staff participate in Kids Voting Northern Kentucky, which encourages parents to bring their children with them to the polling place. There, 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.

We are part of this cause nationally, too, through the American Democracy Project and the Campus Election Engagement Project, two networks with a combined membership of over 600 colleges and universities. Together, those represent a current and continuing commitment to civic education, and it is that commitment that deepens our celebration of HB 574.

While much work remains, Kentucky's bill represents great progress for the Commonwealth and an example that bipartisanship is indeed possible in these fractious times. It is my hope that our state and all others continue the effort to expand and solidify voting rights for all citizens in the months and years ahead.