

Judge Rules School Board Elections Violate Voting Rights Act

ACLU Calls Ruling A Victory For Political Equality

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COLUMBIA, SC – A federal judge ruled late Thursday that the method of electing members to a South Carolina county school board resulted in unlawful racial discrimination in violation of the Voting Rights Act. The decision comes in a long-running American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit challenging Lexington County School District Three elections that dilute the minority vote. In her ruling, Judge Margaret B. Seymour of the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina ordered new proposals to change the election method within 60 days.

“This is a victory for political equality,” said Laughlin McDonald, Director of the ACLU Voting Rights Project. “The judge’s decision made it very clear that racially polarized voting in the school district is a major problem. We have made a lot of progress when it comes to voting rights, but this decision shows the continuing importance of the Voting Rights Act to ensure effective minority participation in the political process.”

The school board district has a significant minority population and, before 1994, three black individuals were elected to the board. That year, elections were changed from being held annually during the last week of February to November of even-numbered years, to coincide with the general election. Following that change, not a single minority was elected until after the lawsuit was filed in 2003. Judge Seymour found that “there are lingering socio-economic effects of discrimination” in the county and that black voters in the school district “have been denied equal opportunity to elect School Board members of their choice.”

“This is an incredible decision that will have a significant impact for the black community in this district,” said R.O. Levy, a plaintiff in the case. “We will now have a more effective say in the operation of schools in the district. This is what equal opportunity in elections is all about.”

Attorneys in the case are McDonald and Meredith Bell-Platts of the ACLU Voting Rights Project and cooperating attorney Herbert Buhl of Columbia, SC.