
SENATE BILL 5047

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By Senators Saldaña, Trudeau, Nguyen, C. Wilson, Dhingra, Conway, Frame, Hasegawa, Hunt, Kuderer, Liiias, Lovelett, Nobles, Pedersen, Randall, Stanford, and Valdez

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1 AN ACT Relating to enhancing the Washington voting rights act;
2 amending RCW 29A.92.010, 29A.92.030, 29A.92.040, 29A.92.060,
3 29A.92.090, 29A.92.110, 29A.92.070, 29A.92.080, 29A.92.130, and
4 36.32.020; adding new sections to chapter 29A.92 RCW; and providing
5 an effective date.

6 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

7 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 1.** A new section is added to chapter 29A.92
8 RCW to read as follows:

9 In further recognition of the protections for the right to vote
10 provided by the Constitution of the state of Washington, statutes,
11 rules and regulations, and local laws, town charters, and ordinances
12 related to the right to vote shall be construed liberally in favor
13 of:

- 14 (1) Protecting the right to cast an effective ballot;
- 15 (2) Ensuring that eligible voters are not impaired in registering
16 to vote or voting including having their votes counted; and
- 17 (3) Ensuring that voters of race, color, and language minority
18 groups have equitable access to fully participate in the electoral
19 process in registering to vote and voting free from improper dilution
20 or abridgement of voting power.

1 **Sec. 2.** RCW 29A.92.010 and 2018 c 113 s 103 are each amended to
2 read as follows:

3 The definitions in this section apply throughout this chapter
4 unless the context clearly requires otherwise. In applying these
5 definitions and other terms in this chapter, courts may rely on
6 relevant federal case law for guidance.

7 (1) "At large election" means any of the following methods of
8 electing members of the governing body of a political subdivision:

9 (a) One in which the voters of the entire jurisdiction elect the
10 members to the governing body;

11 (b) One in which the candidates are required to reside within
12 given areas of the jurisdiction and the voters of the entire
13 jurisdiction elect the members to the governing body; or

14 (c) One that combines the criteria in (a) and (b) of this
15 subsection or one that combines at large with district-based
16 elections.

17 (2) "Cohesive" means that members of a group tend to prefer the
18 same candidates or other electoral choices.

19 (3) "District-based elections" means a method of electing members
20 to the governing body of a political subdivision in which the
21 candidate must reside within an election district that is a divisible
22 part of the political subdivision and is elected only by voters
23 residing within that election district.

24 ~~((3))~~ (4) "Polarized voting" means voting in which there is a
25 difference~~(, as defined in case law regarding enforcement of the~~
26 ~~federal voting rights act, 52 U.S.C. 10301 et seq.,)~~ in the choice
27 of candidates or other electoral choices that are preferred by voters
28 in a protected class or a coalition of protected classes, and in the
29 choice of candidates and electoral choices that are preferred by
30 voters in the rest of the electorate.

31 ~~((4))~~ (5) "Political subdivision" means any county, city, town,
32 school district, fire protection district, port district, or public
33 utility district, but does not include the state.

34 ~~((5))~~ (6) "Protected class" means a class of voters who are
35 members of a race, color, or language minority group in the state of
36 Washington, as this class is referenced and defined in the federal
37 voting rights act, 52 U.S.C. 10301 et seq.

38 **Sec. 3.** RCW 29A.92.030 and 2019 c 64 s 7 are each amended to
39 read as follows:

1 (1) A political subdivision is in violation of this chapter when
2 it is shown that:

3 (a) Elections in the political subdivision exhibit polarized
4 voting; and

5 (b) Members of a protected class or classes do not have an equal
6 opportunity to elect candidates of their choice as a result of the
7 dilution or abridgment of the rights of members of that protected
8 class or classes.

9 ~~(2) ((The fact that members of a protected class are not
10 geographically compact or concentrated to constitute a majority in a
11 proposed or existing district-based election district shall not
12 preclude a finding of a violation under this chapter, but may be a
13 factor in determining a remedy. The equal opportunity to elect shall
14 be assessed pragmatically, based on local election conditions, and
15 may include crossover districts.~~

16 ~~(3))~~ In determining whether there is polarized voting under this
17 chapter, the court shall analyze election results including, but not
18 limited to, elections of the governing body of the political
19 subdivision, ballot measure elections, elections in which at least
20 one candidate is a member of a protected class, and other electoral
21 choices that affect the rights and privileges of members of a
22 protected class. The court is not required to consider explanations,
23 including partisanship, for why polarized voting under this chapter
24 exists in the political subdivision to determine whether polarized
25 voting under this chapter exists in the political subdivision.
26 Elections conducted prior to the filing of an action pursuant to this
27 chapter are more probative to establish the existence of ~~((racially))~~
28 polarized voting than elections conducted after the filing of an
29 action.

30 ~~((4))~~ (3) The election of candidates who are members of a
31 protected class and who were elected prior to the filing of an action
32 pursuant to this chapter shall not preclude a finding of polarized
33 voting that results in an unequal opportunity for a protected class
34 to elect candidates of their choice.

35 (4) The equal opportunity to elect shall be assessed
36 pragmatically, based on local election conditions, and may include
37 crossover districts. No single factor is dispositive or necessary to
38 establish a violation of this section.

39 (5) The fact that members of a protected class are not
40 geographically compact or concentrated to constitute a majority in a

1 proposed or existing district-based election district shall not
2 preclude a finding of a violation under this chapter, but may be a
3 factor in determining a remedy.

4 (6) Proof of intent on the part of the voters or elected
5 officials to discriminate against a protected class is not required
6 for a cause of action to be sustained.

7 ~~((6))~~ (7) Other factors such as the history of discrimination,
8 the use of electoral devices or other voting practices or procedures
9 that may enhance the dilutive effects of at large elections, denial
10 of access to those processes determining which groups of candidates
11 will receive financial or other support in a given election, the
12 extent to which members of a protected class bear the effects of past
13 discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and health,
14 which hinder their ability to participate effectively in the
15 political process, and the use of overt or subtle racial appeals in
16 political campaigns are probative, but not necessary factors, to
17 establish a violation of this chapter.

18 (8) A class of people protected by this section may include a
19 coalition of members of different racial, color, or language minority
20 groups. A coalition of members of different protected classes is not
21 required to demonstrate that each individual racial, color, or
22 language minority group which comprises the coalition is cohesive,
23 only that the coalition as a whole is cohesive.

24 **Sec. 4.** RCW 29A.92.040 and 2018 c 113 s 201 are each amended to
25 read as follows:

26 (1) A political subdivision that conducts an election pursuant to
27 state, county, or local law, is authorized to change its electoral
28 system, including, but not limited to, implementing a district-based
29 election system, or increasing the number of elected officials on a
30 county commission as authorized by section 12 of this act, to remedy
31 a potential violation of RCW 29A.92.020.

32 (2) If a political subdivision invokes its authority under this
33 section to implement a district-based election system, the districts
34 shall be drawn in a manner consistent with RCW 29A.92.050.

35 **Sec. 5.** RCW 29A.92.060 and 2019 c 64 s 9 are each amended to
36 read as follows:

37 (1) A voter who resides in the political subdivision or an
38 organization whose membership includes or is likely to include a

1 voter in the jurisdiction and who resides in the political
2 subdivision who intends to challenge a political subdivision's
3 electoral system under this chapter shall first notify the political
4 subdivision. The political subdivision shall promptly make such
5 notice public.

6 (2) The notice provided shall identify and provide contact
7 information for the person or persons who intend to file an action,
8 and shall identify the protected class or classes whose members do
9 not have an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice or
10 an equal opportunity to influence the outcome of an election because
11 of alleged vote dilution and polarized voting. The notice shall also
12 include a type of remedy the person believes may address the alleged
13 violation of RCW 29A.92.030.

14 **Sec. 6.** RCW 29A.92.090 and 2019 c 64 s 12 are each amended to
15 read as follows:

16 (1) After exhaustion of the time period in RCW 29A.92.080, any
17 voter who resides in a political subdivision or organization whose
18 membership includes or is likely to include a voter in the
19 jurisdiction and who resides in the political subdivision where a
20 violation of RCW 29A.92.020 is alleged may file an action in the
21 superior court of the county in which the political subdivision is
22 located. If the action is against a county, the action may be filed
23 in the superior court of such county, or in the superior court of
24 either of the two nearest judicial districts as determined pursuant
25 to RCW 36.01.050(2). An action filed pursuant to this chapter does
26 not need to be filed as a class action.

27 (2) (~~Members~~) A coalition of members of different protected
28 classes may file an action jointly pursuant to this chapter if they
29 demonstrate that the combined voting preferences of the multiple
30 protected classes are polarized against the rest of the electorate. A
31 coalition of members of different protected classes is not required
32 to demonstrate that each individual racial, color, or language
33 minority group which comprises the coalition is cohesive.

34 **Sec. 7.** RCW 29A.92.110 and 2019 c 454 s 2 are each amended to
35 read as follows:

36 (1) (~~The~~) After finding a violation of RCW 29A.92.020 or upon
37 stipulation of the parties, the court may order appropriate remedies
38 including, but not limited to, the imposition of a district-based

1 election system or expansion of the number of elected county
2 commissioners if authorized by section 12 of this act. ((The court
3 may order the affected jurisdiction to draw or redraw district
4 boundaries or appoint an individual or panel to draw or redraw
5 district lines. The proposed districts must be approved by the court
6 prior to their implementation.)) In tailoring a remedy, the court
7 shall consider proposed remedies by the parties and may not give
8 deference to a proposed remedy only because it is proposed by the
9 political subdivision. The court may not approve a remedy that
10 violates this chapter.

11 (2) If the court orders a district-based remedy, the court must
12 approve proposed district boundaries prior to their implementation.
13 The court must determine that the proposed district boundaries will
14 not violate this chapter.

15 (3) Implementation of a district-based remedy is not precluded by
16 the fact that members of a protected class do not constitute a
17 numerical majority within a proposed district-based election
18 district. If, in tailoring a remedy, the court orders the
19 implementation of a district-based election district where the
20 members of the protected class are not a numerical majority, the
21 court shall do so in a manner that provides the protected class an
22 equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. The court may
23 also approve a district-based election system that provides the
24 protected class the opportunity to join in a coalition of two or more
25 protected classes to elect candidates of their choice if there is
26 demonstrated political cohesion among the protected classes.

27 ((+3)) (4) In tailoring a remedy after a finding of a violation
28 of RCW 29A.92.020 or upon stipulation of the parties:

29 (a) If the court's order providing a remedy or approving proposed
30 districts, whichever is later, is issued during the period of time
31 between the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November and on
32 or before January 15th of the following year, the court shall order
33 new elections, conducted pursuant to the remedy, to occur at the next
34 succeeding general election. If a special filing period is required,
35 filings for that office shall be reopened for a period of three
36 business days, such three-day period to be fixed by the filing
37 officer.

38 (b) If the court's order providing a remedy or approving proposed
39 districts, whichever is later, is issued during the period of time
40 between January 16th and on or before the first Monday of November,

1 the next election will occur as scheduled and organized under the
2 current electoral system, but the court shall order new elections to
3 occur pursuant to the remedy at the general election the following
4 calendar year.

5 (c) The remedy may provide for the political subdivision to hold
6 elections for the members of its governing body at the same time as
7 regularly scheduled elections for statewide or federal offices. All
8 positions on the governing body must stand for election at the next
9 election for the governing body, scheduled pursuant to this
10 subsection (~~((3))~~) (4). The governing body may subsequently choose to
11 stagger the terms of its positions.

12 (~~((4))~~) (5) Within thirty days of the conclusion of any action
13 filed under RCW 29A.92.100, the political subdivision must publish on
14 the subdivision's website, the outcome and summary of the action, as
15 well as the legal costs incurred by the subdivision. If the political
16 subdivision does not have its own website, then it may publish on the
17 county website.

18 **Sec. 8.** RCW 29A.92.070 and 2019 c 64 s 10 are each amended to
19 read as follows:

20 (1) The political subdivision shall work in good faith with the
21 person or organization providing the notice to implement a remedy
22 that provides the protected class or classes identified in the notice
23 an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. Such work
24 in good faith to implement a remedy may include, but is not limited
25 to consideration of: (a) Relevant electoral data; (b) relevant
26 demographic data, including the most recent census data available;
27 and (c) any other information that would be relevant to implementing
28 a remedy.

29 (2) If the political subdivision adopts a remedy that takes the
30 notice into account, or adopts the notice's proposed remedy, the
31 political subdivision shall seek a court order acknowledging that the
32 political subdivision's remedy complies with RCW 29A.92.020 and was
33 prompted by a plausible violation. The person who submitted the
34 notice may support or oppose such an order, and may obtain public
35 records to do so. The political subdivision must provide all
36 political, census, and demographic data and any analysis of that data
37 used to develop the remedy in its filings seeking the court order and
38 with any documents made public. All facts and reasonable inferences
39 shall be viewed in the light most favorable to those opposing the

1 political subdivision's proposed remedy at this stage. There shall be
2 a rebuttable presumption that the court will decline to approve the
3 political subdivision's proposed remedy at this stage.

4 (3) If the court concludes that the political subdivision's
5 remedy complies with RCW 29A.92.020, an action under this chapter may
6 not be brought against that political subdivision for four years by
7 any party so long as the political subdivision does not enact a
8 change to or deviation from the remedy during this four-year period
9 that would otherwise give rise to an action under this chapter.

10 (4) In agreeing to adopt the person's or organization's proposed
11 remedy, the political subdivision may do so by stipulation, which
12 shall become a public document.

13 (5) (a) If the court issues an order under subsection (2) of this
14 section, the person or organization who sent the notice may make a
15 demand to the political subdivision for reimbursement of the costs
16 incurred in conducting the research necessary to send the notice. A
17 demand made under this subsection must:

18 (i) Be in writing;

19 (ii) Be received by the political subdivision within 30 days of
20 the adoption of the new electoral system; and

21 (iii) Include financial documentation, such as a detailed invoice
22 for demographic services, that supports the demand. The political
23 subdivision may request additional documentation if the documentation
24 provided is insufficient for the political subdivision to corroborate
25 the claimed costs.

26 (b) The political subdivision shall, within 60 days of receiving
27 the demand, reimburse the reasonable costs of the person or
28 organization who sent the notice, not to exceed \$50,000.

29 **Sec. 9.** RCW 29A.92.080 and 2019 c 64 s 11 are each amended to
30 read as follows:

31 (1) Any voter who resides in the political subdivision or
32 organization whose membership includes or is likely to include a
33 voter in the jurisdiction and who resides in the political
34 subdivision may file an action under this chapter if, (~~one hundred~~
35 ~~eighty~~) 90 days after a political subdivision receives notice of a
36 challenge to its electoral system under RCW 29A.92.060, the political
37 subdivision has not obtained a court order stating that it has
38 adopted a remedy in compliance with RCW 29A.92.020. (~~However, if~~
39 ~~notice is received after July 1, 2021, then the political subdivision~~

1 ~~shall have ninety days to obtain a court order before an action may~~
2 ~~be filed.))~~

3 (2) If a political subdivision has received two or more notices
4 containing materially different proposed remedies, the political
5 subdivision shall work in good faith with the persons to implement a
6 remedy that provides the protected class or classes identified in the
7 notices an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. If
8 the political subdivision adopts one of the remedies offered, or a
9 different remedy that takes multiple notices into account, the
10 political subdivision shall seek a court order acknowledging that the
11 political subdivision's remedy is reasonably necessary to avoid a
12 violation of RCW 29A.92.020. The persons or organizations who
13 submitted the notice may support or oppose such an order, and may
14 obtain public records to do so. The political subdivision must
15 provide all political, census, and demographic data and any analysis
16 of that data used to develop the remedy in its filings seeking the
17 court order and with any documents made public. All facts and
18 reasonable inferences shall be viewed in the light most favorable to
19 those opposing the political subdivision's proposed remedy at this
20 stage. There shall be a rebuttable presumption that the court will
21 decline to approve the political subdivision's proposed remedy at
22 this stage.

23 (3) If the court concludes that the political subdivision's
24 remedy complies with RCW 29A.92.020, an action under this chapter may
25 not be brought against that political subdivision for four years by
26 any party so long as the political subdivision does not enact a
27 change to or deviation from the remedy during this four-year period
28 that would otherwise give rise to an action under this chapter.

29 (4) (a) If the court issues an order under subsection (2) of this
30 section, the persons or organizations who sent notices may make a
31 demand to the political subdivision for reimbursement of the costs
32 incurred in conducting the research necessary to send the notices. A
33 demand made under this subsection must:

34 (i) Be in writing;

35 (ii) Be received by the political subdivision within 30 days of
36 the adoption of the new electoral system; and

37 (iii) Include financial documentation, such as a detailed invoice
38 for demographic services, that supports the demand. The political
39 subdivision may request additional documentation if the documentation

1 provided is insufficient for the political subdivision to corroborate
2 the claimed costs.

3 (b) The political subdivision shall, within 60 days of receiving
4 the demand, reimburse the reasonable costs of the persons or
5 organizations who sent the notices, not to exceed \$50,000.

6 **Sec. 10.** RCW 29A.92.130 and 2018 c 113 s 405 are each amended to
7 read as follows:

8 (1) In any action to enforce this chapter, the court may allow
9 the prevailing plaintiff or plaintiffs, other than the state or
10 political subdivision thereof, reasonable attorneys' fees, all
11 nonattorney fee costs as defined by RCW 4.84.010, and all reasonable
12 expert witness fees, including all such reasonable fees and costs
13 incurred before filing the action. (~~No fees or costs may be awarded~~
14 ~~if no action is filed.~~)

15 (2) (a) A prevailing plaintiff does not need to achieve relief or
16 favorable judgment if the plaintiff demonstrates that they succeeded
17 in altering the political subdivision's behavior to correct a claimed
18 harm.

19 (b) For purposes of this section, "altering the political
20 subdivision's behavior" includes, but is not limited to, adopting a
21 new method of electing a governing body, modifying district
22 boundaries, or amending a voting rule or qualification.

23 (3) Prevailing defendants may recover an award of fees or costs
24 pursuant to RCW 4.84.185.

25 **Sec. 11.** RCW 36.32.020 and 2018 c 113 s 204 are each amended to
26 read as follows:

27 The board of county commissioners of each county shall divide
28 their county into three commissioner districts so that each district
29 shall comprise as nearly as possible one-third of the population of
30 the county: PROVIDED, That the territory comprised in any voting
31 precincts of such districts shall remain compact, and shall not be
32 divided by the lines of said districts.

33 However, the commissioners of any county composed entirely of
34 islands and with a population of less than thirty-five thousand may
35 divide their county into three commissioner districts without regard
36 to population, except that if any single island is included in more
37 than one district, the districts on such island shall comprise, as
38 nearly as possible, equal populations.

1 The commissioners of any county may authorize a change to their
2 electoral system pursuant to RCW 29A.92.040. Except where necessary
3 to comply with a court order issued pursuant to RCW 29A.92.110, and
4 except in the case of an intervening census, the lines of the
5 districts shall not be changed more often than once in four years and
6 only when a full board of commissioners is present. ((The)) Except
7 when authorized under section 12 of this act, the districts shall be
8 designated as districts numbered one, two, and three.

9 NEW SECTION. Sec. 12. A new section is added to chapter 29A.92
10 RCW to read as follows:

11 (1) A county may reasonably increase the number of elected
12 commissioners to remedy a potential violation of RCW 29A.92.020 if
13 the protected class or one of the protected classes subject to
14 alleged vote dilution is Indian tribal status.

15 (2) After finding a violation of RCW 29A.92.020 or upon
16 stipulation of the parties, the court may order a reasonable increase
17 in the number of elected officials on a county commission if the
18 defendant political subdivision is a county and the protected class
19 or one of the protected classes subject to alleged vote dilution is
20 Indian tribal status.

21 NEW SECTION. Sec. 13. If any provision of this act or its
22 application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the
23 remainder of the act or the application of the provision to other
24 persons or circumstances is not affected.

25 NEW SECTION. Sec. 14. This act takes effect January 1, 2024.

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