A.6678-A (Walker)/S.1046-A (Myrie)

**Purpose:** This bill, titled the “John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act,” or “New York State Voting Rights Act,” would improve the security of our elections by providing state level protections modeled after those in the federal Voting Rights Act, which has not yet passed. It would address a wide variety of long-overlooked infringements on the right to vote, and put in place some of the strongest voter protections in the country.

**Statement of Support:** This bill would place the state on the side of qualified voters seeking to cast valid ballots, and have them counted, whenever possible. It would help judges interpret the law so as to allow every eligible person to register and vote.

Preclearance, the crown jewel of the 1965 federal Voting Rights Act, the most effective civil rights law in U.S. history, prohibited states from implementing any change affecting voting without receiving preapproval from the federal government. But preclearance was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013, causing voting rights advocates to propose the recent federal Voting Rights Act, which would restore preclearance. The federal Voting Rights Act has not passed Congress. The NYS Voting Rights Act (NYVRA) would grant the NYS Attorney General or certain state courts the authority to “pre-clear” changes to election rules. Instead of voters having to prove new election laws or rules are discriminatory, the NYVRA places the burden on jurisdictions or county boards of elections to prove they are not.

The bill would strengthen the law against voter deception and intimidation, such as a county threatening to send voter information to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. It would create causes of action against voter dilution and suppression, through more efficient and effective means to protect minority voting strength, and through prosecutions against vote suppression and racial gerrymandering. It would also create a statewide database of election results, voter files, and more. This will be valuable to voters and others in enforcement of voter protections, reducing the burden on boards of elections when responding to FOIL requests.

Additionally, it would provide language assistance anywhere two percent, or 4,000 people, of a district’s voting-age population speak English “less than very well”, according to the Census. Regarding attorneys’ fees, the bill would create an incentive to enforce voter protections by allowing plaintiffs to be reimbursed for legal costs if they win a case.

The Sierra Club has been working to defend and expand access to voting. We know that voting is one crucial way we make our voices heard on the issues that matter most to us, whether that’s healthcare, the economy, or clean air and water. For these reasons, we strongly urge that you support this bill.

**The Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter Urges Your Support of A.6678-A/S.1046-A**