GIVING THE BARKING DOG A BITE:  
CHALLENGING FELON  
DISENFRANCHISEMENT UNDER THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965

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INTRODUCTION

Felon disenfranchisement—the practice of denying the right to vote to currently incarcerated felons, those serving terms of probation or parole, and former felons—prevents over four and one-half million men and women from voting in local, state, and federal elections.1 Felon disenfranchisement laws are particularly troublesome when viewed in light of their racially disparate impact. While African-Americans comprise approximately 12% of the United States population,2 they comprise 36% of the population that has lost the right to vote due to a criminal conviction.3

The right to vote has been declared fundamental by the United States Supreme Court, 4 yet states, which are constitutionally empowered to control voter qualifications, continue to disenfranchise felons and ex-felons in staggering numbers. Consequently, some of the state laws that restrict the voting rights of felons have been challenged as impermissible violations of that fundamental right. These challenges have traditionally proceeded as claims of violations of the Equal Protection Clause, the Due Process Clause, and the Fifteenth Amendment.5 Attempts to overturn felon disenfranchisement laws have, however, been largely unsuccessful.

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1. In this Note, the term “felon disenfranchisement,” which is also commonly called “prisoner disenfranchisement” or “felony disenfranchisement,” is used to refer generally to the practice of denying a citizen the right to vote due to a criminal conviction, including both felony and even some misdemeanor convictions. In this Note, the term “felon” refers to any individual who is disenfranchised under such a law.


5. See infra Part I.C.1.
The Voting Rights Act of 1965 ("VRA"), 6 which prohibits states from imposing racially discriminatory voting practices, has emerged in the last decade as a potentially powerful tool for challenging felon disenfranchisement laws. The VRA was revised in 1982 to prohibit voting restrictions that have a racially discriminatory impact, abandoning the previous version of the Act which prohibited only voting restrictions that were enacted with discriminatory intent. 7 Because felon disenfranchisement statutes disproportionately impact African-Americans, 8 plaintiffs have attempted to use the revised version of the VRA to challenge the legality of state felon disenfranchisement laws. These challenges have not yet resulted in the overturning of a state felon disenfranchisement law. Yet if VRA challenges to these laws are permitted to proceed in a meaningful way, because the racial impact of felon disenfranchisement is so great, many of these laws could be declared impermissible restrictions on the right to vote.

The federal circuit courts are divided on whether the VRA provides a valid means to challenge felon disenfranchisement laws because such challenges involve application of a federal law to state statutes in an area of law typically under state control. Four recent cases in three circuits have addressed this issue head on. In each, convicted felons who at the time were incarcerated, on probation or parole, or have already fully served their sentences alleged that their state’s felon disenfranchisement scheme violated the VRA. These cases have not yet addressed whether the state felon disenfranchisement statutes under review must be struck down for having a racially discriminatory impact. Rather, these four cases have addressed only whether a VRA challenge to a state felon disenfranchisement statute can proceed.

The three federal circuit courts that have addressed this issue disagreed about the use of the VRA in the context of state felon disenfranchisement statutes. The disagreement is largely about the allowable scope of the VRA as legislation passed pursuant to the enforcement powers of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The circuits also disagree about whether there must be a “clear statement” from Congress that it intended the VRA to apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes, the underlying congressional intent that accompanied the amendment of the VRA in 1982, and whether the VRA, as applied to felon disenfranchisement laws, is congruent and proportional legislation under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. All of these factors inform whether the VRA, a federal law, may be used to challenge state felon disenfranchisement statutes.

7. See infra notes 116-21 and accompanying text.
8. See infra notes 59-71 and accompanying text.
The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled in two separate cases, *Baker v. Pataki*\(^9\) and *Muntaqim v. Coombe*,\(^{10}\) that VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes cannot proceed. Application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement, the Second Circuit concluded in both cases, would impermissibly alter the state/federal balance of power, as states have traditionally enjoyed exclusive control of establishing voter qualifications. Moreover, the Second Circuit held that an interpretation that the VRA applies to these state statutes would violate rules of constitutional construction.

The Eleventh and Ninth Circuits took the opposite approach from the Second Circuit. In *Farrakhan v. Washington*, the Ninth Circuit ruled that the VRA can be used to challenge the Washington law that prohibits convicted felons from voting.\(^{11}\) The Eleventh Circuit embraced this approach in *Johnson v. Governor of Florida*, where the court determined that a VRA challenge to Florida’s statutory scheme, which disenfranchises not only current felons but all ex-felons, should be allowed to proceed.\(^{12}\) These two circuits determined that permitting application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws does not violate the established balance of power between the states and Congress, nor do such challenges offend notions of constitutional construction.

On November 8, 2004, the United States Supreme Court denied petitions for certiorari in two of these cases—the Ninth Circuit’s decision in *Farrakhan* and the Second Circuit’s decision in *Muntaqim*.\(^{13}\) Both petitions specifically requested that the Court decide whether felons and ex-felons can challenge their state felon disenfranchisement laws as having a racially discriminatory impact under the VRA. The Supreme Court’s decision not to hear these cases cemented the circuit split that has been developing over the last ten years.\(^{14}\)

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\(^9\) 85 F.3d 919 (2d Cir. 1996).
\(^{10}\) 366 F.3d 102 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 125 S. Ct. 480 (2004) (mem.), *reh’g en banc granted*, No. 01-7260, 2004 WL 2998551 (2d Cir. Dec. 29, 2004). The Second Circuit recently decided to rehear this case en banc, but did not vacate its previous decision. *See* *Muntaqim*, 2004 WL 2998551, at *1.
\(^{11}\) *Farrakhan* v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009, 1011-12 (9th Cir. 2003).
\(^{12}\) *Johnson* v. Governor of Fla., 353 F.3d 1287 (11th Cir. 2003), *reh’g en banc granted*, *opinion vacated by* 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004). *Johnson* was recently granted rehearing en banc, vacating the court’s previous decision, and is currently pending decision. No petition for certiorari was filed in that case. *See* *Johnson*, 377 F.3d at 1163.
\(^{14}\) *See* Tony Mauro, *Mixed Signals from Supreme Court on Felon Voting Rights*, Legal Times, Nov. 9, 2004 (claiming that the Court “sent conflicting signals” on the
The Ninth, Eleventh, and Second Circuit decisions highlighted fundamental disagreements over the correct reading of the language of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the breadth of Congress’s enforcement powers under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as they relate to the application of federal legislation to areas of traditional state control. Specifically, this Note examines: (1) how to address inherent contradictions within the language of the Fourteenth Amendment; (2) whether the VRA, as applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, exceeds Congress’s enforcement powers under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; (3) whether the clear statement rule applies when interpreting section 2 of the VRA; and (4) whether Congress intended that the VRA apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes, using the recent litigation regarding the permissibility of challenging state felon disenfranchisement statutes under the VRA, as a means of understanding the disparate views of the federal circuit courts. This Note also proposes a possible solution to the current split among the three circuits that have addressed the issue.

Part I of this Note explores the history of felon disenfranchisement and the history of racially discriminatory voting practices in the United States. Part I also explores some of the key areas of conflict between the Second, Ninth, and Eleventh Circuits regarding the use of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges. Part II of this Note examines the specific tensions between the circuits in the four recent cases in the Second, Ninth, and Eleventh circuits and describes in detail the different approaches taken in the opinions issued by these courts.

Part III of this Note argues that the Supreme Court’s denial of certiorari in the Ninth and Second Circuit decisions leaves an irreconcilable conflict that is best resolved by allowing the application of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges. Part III posits that there is no inherent constitutional conflict that prevents VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes from proceeding. It further contends that federalism concerns do not preclude the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes because the VRA, as applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, does not exceed Congress’s enforcement powers. Therefore, in applying the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes, federal courts need not look at the congressional intent behind the VRA or whether there has been a clear statement. Thus, the VRA can properly be applied to state felon disenfranchisement statutes.

issue of felon disenfranchisement, but that “the high court may yet decide the issue in a future case”), at http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1099927152958.
I. FELON DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN VOTING: HISTORY AND CHALLENGES

A. Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States

In the United States, a felony conviction carries not only criminal repercussions, but also civil ones. Civil consequences include the loss of the right to hold public office, the loss of the right to serve as a juror, and the loss of the right to vote. Approximately 4.7 million Americans were prohibited from voting in elections in the year 2000 because they were incarcerated due to criminal convictions, had previous criminal convictions, were still serving terms of probation or parole for criminal convictions, or had fees outstanding that were imposed as a condition of a criminal conviction.

Felon disenfranchisement has its roots in ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Medieval Europe, where those who committed crimes were banished from their communities and subject to loss of their property rights and the ability to inherit or pass down property to their heirs. Early European felon disenfranchisement was limited to cases of serious crimes and was imposed on a case-by-case basis by judicial pronouncement. Colonists brought the practice to the United States, though they abandoned other European civil disabilities, such as loss of inheritance rights.

Early felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States were, for the most part, limited to a few particular offenses. By the mid-1800s, more than half of the states prohibited felons who had committed serious offenses from voting. Today, citizens may be disenfranchised for committing minor offenses, including misdemeanors and felonies that do not impose a sentence of incarceration.

19. See Ewald, supra note 18, at 1061.
22. At that time, the right to vote was not universal. Women, many racial and ethnic minorities, people who could not read, and those who did not own property were not permitted to vote. See Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 3.
23. See id. at 5 (citing, as an example, the loss of voting rights for a conviction for passing a bad check in Mississippi).
can even be imposed on a first-time offender who enters a guilty plea, as most first-time offenders do, regardless of guilt or innocence. 24

Felon disenfranchisement imposed by state legislatures continues despite the fact that the Supreme Court has declared voting to be a fundamental right that requires the application of strict scrutiny analysis under the Equal Protection Clause. 25 The United States Constitution grants states, and not the federal government, the power to establish voter qualifications. 26 There is therefore no federal law that disenfranchises felons, 27 as states have the inherent power to establish “[t]he Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives.” 28 Most states do not distinguish state from federal offenses in applying felon disenfranchisement statutes. 29 Because the practice of felon disenfranchisement is imposed at a state level, there is a resulting “national crazy-quilt of disqualifications and restoration procedures.” 30

dissenting, noted that felon disenfranchisement could even be imposed for convictions “for seduction under promise of marriage, or conspiracy to operate a motor vehicle without a muffler... vagrancy in Alabama or breaking a water pipe in North Dakota... [e]ven a jaywalking or traffic conviction.” Richardson v. Ramirez, 418 U.S. 24, 75 n.24 (1974) (Marshall, J., dissenting) (citations omitted).


26. U.S. Const. art. I, § 2, cl. 1; see John M. Mathews, Legislative and Judicial History of the Fifteenth Amendment 12 (Da Capo Press 1971) (1909) (“[R]egulation of the suffrage was a matter properly belonging to the state governments.”). States also have the authority to regulate criminal law. The Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution gives the states police powers to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens. See U.S. Const. amend. X; Medtronic, Inc. v. Lohr, 518 U.S. 470, 475 (1996).


28. U.S. Const. art. I, § 4, cl. 1; see id. amend. XVII.


Only two states—Vermont and Maine—do not restrict the voting rights of felons, permitting them to vote from prison.31 The remaining forty-eight states and the District of Columbia prohibit felons from voting while incarcerated.32 Of those forty-eight states, twenty-nine also extend the prohibition to parolees, and thirty-two extend the prohibition to both parolees and probationers.33 In fourteen states ex-prisoners are not permitted to vote for some period of time after the completion of all terms of their sentences, and in some of these states ex-felons are not permitted to vote for the duration of their lives.34 Restoring one’s right to vote is purportedly possible—even in states that permanently disenfranchise felons—by way of pardon, executive order, or a clemency proceeding, although there may be a waiting period before such action is permitted.35

The United States is the only democratic country in the world that disenfranchises so many felons.36 This is, in large part, due to the soaring incarceration rate in the United States. The incarceration rate was 686 per 100,000 people in the United States in the year 2000, while the rate in Canada was only 105 per 100,000, the rate in Germany was only 95 per 100,000, and the rate in Japan was only 45 per 100,000.37 As a result, “the United States stands at an extreme end


33. Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 563 tbl.1; Parkes, supra note 32, at 77.

34. See Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 1.

35. See id. at 5-6. This process may be time or cost prohibitive, rendering it “illusory.” Marc Mauer, Disenfranchisement: The Modern-Day Voting Rights Challenge, 40 C.R. J. 40, 42 (2002); see Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 5-6.


of the spectrum in comparison to other democratic nations” when it comes to limiting prisoner and ex-prisoner voting rights.38

The trends in legislative activity in the area of felon disenfranchisement demonstrate mercurial attitudes toward the practice. In the 1860s and 1870s, the country saw a spike in more restrictive felon disenfranchisement practices, a period of white legislative backlash to Reconstruction.39 In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the country saw another spike in legislative activity characterized by the “liberalization” of such statutes.40 The 1990s were “once again restrictive rather than liberal.”41 In February 2002, however, a United States Senate measure that would restore voting rights to all ex-felons in federal elections garnered enough support to make it to the floor of the Senate, a possible move back towards expansion of voting rights.42 This measure was ultimately voted down.43

Proponents of felon disenfranchisement argue that when citizens commit crimes, they forfeit their right to engage in voting and deserve to suffer a “civil death.”44 Another common rationale supporting felon disenfranchisement laws is that these restrictions maintain the “purity of the ballot box.”45 This argument turns on the claim that felons pose a serious threat to the integrity of the voting process—namely, that they will engage in fraud to distort the outcomes of elections.46 Proponents of felon disenfranchisement laws also assert

38. Civic Participation and Rehabilitation Act of 1999: Hearing on H.R. 906 Before the Subcomm. on the Constitution of the Comm. on the Judiciary, House of Representatiges, 106th Cong. 31 (1999) (statement of Marc Mauer, Assistant Director, The Sentencing Project); see Pamela S. Karlan, Convictions and Doubts: Retribution, Representation, and the Debate over Felon Disenfranchisement, 56 Stan. L. Rev. 1147, 1168-69 (2004) (noting that “consensus ‘within the world community’ is uniformly against lifetime disenfranchisement” and that “the states that continue to exclude all felons permanently are outliers, both within the United States and in the world”).
39. See Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 582-83.
40. Id. at 583.
41. Id.
42. See id. at 572.
43. The bill was defeated by a vote of 63 to 31. Id. at 599; cf. Marc Mauer, Felon Disenfranchisement: A Policy Whose Time Has Passed?, 31 Hum. Rts. 16, 17 (2004).
44. But see George P. Fletcher, Disenfranchisement As Punishment: Reflections on the Racial Uses of Infamia, 46 UCLA L. Rev. 1895, 1899 (1999) (arguing that the concept of “civil death” made sense in an age where all felons were sentenced to death, and those still living had “little ground to complain”). See generally Ewald, supra note 18.
46. See Washington v. State, 75 Ala. 582, 585 (1884) (arguing that the purpose of disenfranchisement is “to preserve the purity of the ballot box, which is the only sure foundation of republican liberty, and which needs protection against the invasion of corruption”). But see Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1899 (claiming that this argument
that states are empowered by the Constitution to impose appropriate criminal penalties upon felons, and disenfranchisement is simply one of those penalties.47

Despite these assertions, opponents of felon disenfranchisement argue that the practice must end because the right to vote is at “the heart of representative government.”48 Voting is a right that has been declared fundamental by the Supreme Court, these critics argue, and should not be denied to such a large number of people; over 2% of the voting-age population in the United States is not permitted to vote due to felon disenfranchisement.49 This point is highlighted by the nation’s growing incarceration rate.50 While state legislatures have tended to limit the use of permanent disenfranchisement over time, the gross number of people disenfranchised by such laws continues to balloon.51 Some commentators have recognized the actual impact that felon disenfranchisement has on the outcomes of both state and federal elections, including presidential elections.52 The incredibly close vote in Florida in the 2000 presidential race contributed to a resurgence in the movement to abolish felon disenfranchisement statutes.53 In the wake of that election, the National Commission on

47. See Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 16; cf. supra note 26 and accompanying text.
49. See Behrens, supra note 31, at 239.
51. See Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1899.
52. See Uggen & Manza, supra note 17, at 781, 789, 792-93. Uggen and Manza’s analysis of the impact of felon disenfranchisement in the national presidential race in 2000 reveals that had Florida not had any felon disenfranchisement statute, Al Gore would have defeated George W. Bush by a margin of approximately 84,000 votes in Florida. Id. at 792-93. Uggen and Manza assert that “[s]ince 1978, there have been over 400 Senate elections, and we find 7 outcomes that may have been reversed if not for the disenfranchisement of felons and ex-felons.” Id. at 789. They also estimate that had there been no felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States, the Democratic Party would have held majority control in the United States Senate from 1986-2002. Id. at 794. Professor Gabriel Chin also notes that because African-Americans are overwhelmingly Democrats, “Republicans have a terrible conflict of interest with respect to African-American voter turnout and its connection to felon disenfranchisement.” Chin, supra note 25, at 307.
53. Pamela Karlan notes: For a variety of reasons, the aftermath of Election 2000 seems to have reinvigorated the voting rights restoration movement. The scope of felon disenfranchisement and its disproportionate impact on members of minority groups has received far greater national attention and state-level political
Federal Election Reform recommended that all states end the practice of ex-felon disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{54}

Critics of felon disenfranchisement advance a number of other compelling arguments. Some argue that the country has extended the concept of universal suffrage over the last 150 years, and should complete that movement by re-enfranchising felons.\textsuperscript{55} Some argue that disenfranchising ex-felons does little good in terms of rehabilitation, deterrence, or the other policy rationales that underlie the criminal justice system and serve to stigmatize ex-felons who are disenfranchised.\textsuperscript{56} Critics also argue that because the United States is one of the only Western democracies that permanently bans felons from voting, the practice marginalizes the country from the global community.\textsuperscript{57} Opponents also point to the lack of public support for felon disenfranchisement laws. One recent survey revealed that 80\% of Americans favor restoring voting rights to former felons once they have served their sentences.\textsuperscript{58}

One of the strongest arguments that critics advance for eliminating felon disenfranchisement laws in the United States is that such laws disproportionately impact African-American communities. Imprisonment rates for African-Americans have continuously exceeded the rates for white Americans since the Civil War.\textsuperscript{59} In 1996, African-American men were 8.5 times more likely than white men to be imprisoned and since 1988 the rate of incarceration for African-American men has increased ten times faster than that of white men.\textsuperscript{60} Nearly 1.5 million African-Americans are disenfranchised, which accounted for 36\% of the total population of felons disenfranchised in 1998.\textsuperscript{61} At this rate, 40\% of African-American men could be disenfranchised in the states where ex-offenders as well as those currently incarcerated, serving probation, or on parole, are all

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  \item efforts have restored the voting rights of nearly a half-million people. By contrast, litigation challenging even lifetime felon disenfranchisement has been uniformly unsuccessful.
  \item Karlan, supra note 50, at 1365.
  \item See Mauer, supra note 43, at 17. Former Presidents Carter and Ford chair the Commission. Id.
  \item 54. See Mauer, supra note 43, at 17. Former Presidents Carter and Ford chair the Commission. Id.
  \item 55. See Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 14.
  \item 56. See id. at 17; Ewald, supra note 18, at 1105; Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1896 (noting that some lifelong sanctions “flout the retributive principle that the offender should be required (and permitted) to pay his debt in full to society”).
  \item 58. Jeff Manza et al., Public Attitudes Toward Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 68 Pub. Opinion Q. 275, 281 (2004). The same survey revealed that only 60\% favor re-enfranchising those on parole or probation, and only 31\% favor re-enfranchising currently incarcerated felons. Id. at 280.
  \item 59. Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 560.
  \item 60. Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 12.
  \item 61. Id. at 1.
\end{itemize}
disenfranchised, and 30% of all African-American men are predicted to face disenfranchisement either permanently or temporarily in their lifetimes. This is partially the result of disparate targeting by police, disparate prosecutorial activity, and disparate sentencing trends.

Alabama and Florida have some of the most stringent felon disenfranchisement statutes. As a result, in these two states, a staggering 31% of the African-American male voting-age population is prohibited from voting. In Iowa, Mississippi, New Mexico, Virginia, and Wyoming one in four African-American men is permanently disenfranchised. In California, 70% of those sentenced under the state’s “three strikes” law are African-American or Hispanic. Approximately 8400 ex-felons have had their voting rights restored after a period of disenfranchisement in Florida since 1997. Only 25% of these restorations were granted to African-Americans. Of the full pardons granted in the state since 1987, only 15% were granted to African-American ex-felons.

Many consider the racially-disparate impact of felon disenfranchisement intolerable. The numerous arguments against the practice of felon disenfranchisement prompted Professor George P. Fletcher to comment that it is obvious that the country cannot continue to disenfranchise such a significant portion of the population. “The only question,” he asserts, “is whether the reinstatement of voting rights for felons—both in prison and out—will come by the way of legislative change or constitutional ruling.”

62. Id.
63. See id. at 12-13. Disparate drug offense conviction rates greatly contribute to these trends. See id. at 13.
64. See Alexander Keyssar, The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States 307 (2000); Sentencing-Guidelines Study Finds Continuing Disparities, N.Y. Times, Nov. 27, 2004, at A11. Angela Behrens and Christopher Uggen, who conducted a study of felon disenfranchisement laws throughout the past 150 years, concluded as follows:

Our key finding can be summarized concisely and forcefully: the racial composition of state prisons is firmly associated with the adoption of state felon disenfranchisement laws. States with greater nonwhite prison populations have been more likely to ban convicted felons from voting than states with proportionally fewer nonwhites in the criminal justice system.

Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 596.
68. Id. at 11.
70. See id. (citing Gary Kane & Scott Hiaasen, Clemency Process Unfair to Blacks?, Palm Beach Post, Dec. 23, 2001, at 1A).
71. See id. at 1945-46.
72. Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1901-02.
73. Id. Fletcher’s article does not highlight section 2 of the VRA as a potentially
B. The History of Racially Discriminatory Voting Practices in the United States

The history of voting in the United States has been characterized by both restricted voting rights for felons and ex-felons, and by restricted voting rights for racial minorities. Both types of voting restrictions have an interwoven past, and have, at times, collided head on. In particular, many felon disenfranchisement statutes that were enacted and/or enforced after the Civil War were imposed with the express purpose of preventing African-Americans from voting.\footnote{See infra notes 96-100 and accompanying text.} Additionally, even felon disenfranchisement statutes that were not enacted with the specific intent of discriminating on the basis of race have had a racially discriminatory impact on the African-American population of the country.\footnote{See supra notes 59-73 and accompanying text.}

Still, felon disenfranchisement has been but one voting restriction intended to dilute the African-American community's voting strength. The recent cases in the Second, Ninth, and Eleventh Circuits that address the permissibility of using the VRA to challenge felon disenfranchisement statutes consider not only the history of felon disenfranchisement, but also the nation’s history of denying African-Americans the right to vote through a variety of methods. An examination of this country’s general history of racial discrimination in voting—both through felon disenfranchisement and other schemes—sheds light on the current debate over whether the VRA should be permitted to apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes.

1. Early History of Voting Rights and the Civil War Amendments

The United States Constitution of 1787 did not expressly deny the right to vote to any group,\footnote{See Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 561.} yet only 6% of the population at the time was permitted to vote.\footnote{See Mauer, supra note 43, at 16.} Prior to the Civil War, the Constitution also failed to provide any sort of voting protections for its citizens.\footnote{U.S. Dept. of Justice, Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws, Before the Voting Rights Act, at http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/intro/intro_a.htm (last visited Jan. 31, 2005).} At that time only a few states permitted African-Americans to vote at all.\footnote{Id. None permitted women to vote. See Behrens & Uggen, supra note 21, at 562 (noting that the passage of the 19th Amendment finally gave women the right to vote).} After the Civil War concluded, however, Congress passed the Military Reconstruction Act of 1867,\footnote{14 Stat. 428 (1867).} which permitted former
Confederate states to rejoin the Union if each conceded to permitting universal male suffrage. 81

The Military Reconstruction Act was followed by the amendment of the United States Constitution. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, conferring citizenship on all persons born or naturalized in the country and extending equal protection and due process requirements. 82 In 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, which provided that “[t]he right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” 83 These two Amendments are known together with the Thirteenth Amendment as the Civil Rights Amendments. 84

The Fifteenth Amendment, in theory, overcame any state law that prohibited African-Americans from voting. 85 Congress also passed the Enforcement Act of 1870 86 to impose criminal penalties on those who interfered with Fifteenth Amendment protections and the Force Act of 1871 87 which imposed federal oversight of federal elections. 88 As a result of this legislation, former slaves registered to vote, African-Americans could be elected to public office at all levels of government, and African-Americans emerged as voting majorities in many states. 89

Many of the most egregious racially discriminatory voting practices were enacted during the Civil War and Reconstruction to halt this trend of African-American voting. 90 A number of white terrorist organizations used violence and threats to prevent the

81. See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 78; see also Chin, supra note 25, at 270-271 (noting that the Military Reconstruction Act “established military governance of the South and provided for trial of offenses” and resulted in the enfranchisement of approximately one million African-Americans).
82. U.S. Const. amend. XIV.
83. U.S. Const. amend. XV. Gabriel Chin argues that Congress proposed the Fifteenth Amendment with its direct approach to enfranchising African-Americans because the mandate of the Fourteenth Amendment failed to gain traction in the former Confederate states. Chin, supra note 25, at 260-61. Chin also notes that Thaddeus Stevens, the Chair of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, a congressional committee tasked with proposing constitutional amendments to resolve political conflicts following the Civil War, had commented that he had already started to draft the Fifteenth Amendment to grant African-Americans the right to vote even before the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified. Id. at 270.
84. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. U.S. Const. amend. XIII.
85. See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 78.
89. See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 78.
90. See Fellner & Mauer, supra note 3, at 3.
enfranchisement of African-Americans, which worked to reverse the impact of the Fifteenth Amendment. 91 Through the process of “Redemption”—gerrymandering election districts to reduce the strength of African-American voting populations—white citizens regained control of political offices and voting strength. 92 Some states, driven by particularly strong racial discrimination, even amended their state constitutions to support white voting power. 93 These states also enacted poll taxes, private primaries, and literacy tests, all specifically intended to reduce African-American voting strength. 94

It was during this era that felon disenfranchisement emerged as a tool for disenfranchising African-Americans. Despite the intention of the Fourteenth Amendment to require states to meet the mandates of the Equal Protection Clause and Due Process Clause, Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment also provided constitutional support for felon disenfranchisement. The Amendment provides, in part:

But when the right to vote at any election for the choice of electors for President and Vice President of the United States, Representatives in Congress, the Executive and Judicial officers of a State, or the members of the Legislature thereof, is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such State, being twenty-one years of age, and citizens of the United States, or in any way abridged, except for participation in rebellion, or other crime, the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State. 95

In the years following the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, many Southern states embraced Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, using felon disenfranchisement as another means of disenfranchising African-Americans. 96 Many of these states specifically designed their felon disenfranchisement laws “to increase the effect of these laws on black citizens.” 97

91. See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 78.
92. See id.
93. See id.
94. See id.
95. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2 (emphasis added).
96. The court in McLaughlin v. City of Canton, 947 F. Supp. 954, 977 (S.D. Miss., 1995), noted the following:

Virtually all historians agree that [the attempt to enfranchise African-Americans] was greeted by obstructionist whites with alarm. Virtually all historians also agree that disenfranchising tactics and methods, including literacy and property tests, poll taxes, understanding clauses, and grandfather clauses were adopted in hopes of reducing the enthusiasm and lessening the impact of the black vote. Some historians have remarked that disenfranchising provisions in state constitutions for convictions of certain “black” crimes was one additional method explored.

Id.
97. Andrew L. Shapiro, Note, Challenging Criminal Disenfranchisement Under the Voting Rights Act: A New Strategy, 103 Yale L.J. 537, 540 (1993); see Chin, supra note
One way that these Southern states disenfranchised African-Americans through felon disenfranchisement statutes without explicitly violating the Fifteenth Amendment was by disenfranchising those who had committed a particular group of crimes—those committed most often by African-Americans—while exempting felons convicted of crimes typically committed by whites. For example, in 1901 the Alabama legislature designated crimes committed predominately by African-Americans as crimes of “moral turpitude,” and determined that the commission of such crimes warranted imposition of disenfranchisement as a term of punishment. In South Carolina, the crime of murder, which was committed in roughly equal numbers by African-Americans and whites, was not included under the felon disenfranchisement statute, while the crime of adultery, which was committed more often by African-Americans, was included.

Despite the significant advances in African-American voting rights achieved by 1867, by 1910 nearly all of the headway made by the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and its accompanying legislation was negated, hardly any African-American public officials were still in office, and nearly all African-American voters were disenfranchised. The Supreme Court attempted to fight these racist tactics in a number of decisions. None of these decisions, however, eliminated the case-by-case analysis of whether a voting law violated the Fifteenth Amendment, and thus reversing the effects of racially discriminatory election laws proved difficult. Moreover, none of these Supreme Court decisions addressed felon disenfranchisement as an impermissibly racist tactic. African-American voter registration in a

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25, at 305 (“There is strong evidence that the crimes leading to disenfranchisement were manipulated to accomplish the disenfranchisement of African-Americans.”); Ewald, supra note 18, at 1065 (“After Reconstruction, several Southern states carefully re-wrote their criminal disenfranchisement provisions with the express intent of excluding blacks from suffrage.”).

98. See Mauer, supra note 43, at 16 (noting that such laws went unchallenged for 100 years).
100. See Shapiro, supra note 97, at 541.
101. See Gabriel J. Chin, The “Voting Rights Act of 1867”: The Constitutionality of Federal Regulation of Suffrage During Reconstruction, 82 N.C. L. Rev. 1581, 1591-92 (2004); Shapiro, supra note 97, at 538 (noting that only five African-Americans were elected to state legislatures and Congress by 1900, a drop from 324 in 1872, and that in 1867 almost 70% of eligible African-Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi, yet by 1892 the rate had dropped to only 6%).
102. See Gomillion v. Lightfoot, 364 U.S. 339 (1960) (holding that Alabama’s gerrymandering strategy for city boundaries violated the Fifteenth Amendment); Smith v. Allwright, 321 U.S. 649 (1944) (holding that a state “white primary” violated the Fifteenth Amendment); Guinn v. United States, 238 U.S. 347 (1915) (declaring “grandfather clauses,” which required stringent literacy and property qualifications for all voters except those descendants of men who voted before 1867, invalid under the Fifteenth Amendment).
103. See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 78.
number of southern states continued to be much lower than white registration rates, despite Supreme Court action.\textsuperscript{104}

2. The Voting Rights Act of 1965

Congress enacted the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in reaction to the ineffectiveness of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Fifteenth Amendment, their progeny legislation, and Supreme Court action.\textsuperscript{105} The legislature and President Lyndon B. Johnson crafted the VRA in 1965 to specifically counter southern states’ resistance to implementing equal voting rights legislation.\textsuperscript{106} While the VRA provides a wide range of protections, section 2 of the Act is perhaps its most important provision. Section 2 guarantees that

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\text{[n]o voting qualification or prerequisite to voting or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision in a manner which results in a denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.}
\] \textsuperscript{107}

The Supreme Court explained that section 2 of the VRA prohibits “any standards, practices, or procedures which result in the denial or abridgement of the right to vote of any citizen who is a member of a protected class of racial and language minorities.”\textsuperscript{108} Section 2 is also the provision of the VRA recently used to challenge felon disenfranchisement laws.\textsuperscript{109}

a. Early History of the VRA

The VRA was signed into law on August 6, 1965, and those opposing it immediately challenged its constitutionality. The Supreme Court quickly affirmed, in a series of cases, that Congress could constitutionally prohibit voting practices that perpetuated the effects of past intentional discrimination through the VRA, even if such

\textsuperscript{104} See id.


\textsuperscript{106} See U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws, The Voting Rights Act of 1965, at http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/intro/intro_b.htm (last visited Jan. 31, 2005) (stating that Congress had “determined that the existing federal anti-discrimination laws were not sufficient to overcome the resistance by state officials to enforcement of the 15th Amendment” and that case-by-case litigation had proved ineffective).

\textsuperscript{107} 42 U.S.C. § 1973(a).


\textsuperscript{109} See infra Part II.
practices considered alone were not themselves constitutional violations.

In the first case affirming the VRA’s constitutionality, the landmark decision of South Carolina v. Katzenbach, the Supreme Court indicated that the purpose of the VRA was to “rid the country of racial discrimination in voting.” The opinion also explicitly upheld the constitutionality of the VRA:

Congress had found that case-by-case litigation was inadequate to combat widespread and persistent discrimination in voting, because of the inordinate amount of time and energy required to overcome the obstructionist tactics invariably encountered in these lawsuits. After enduring nearly a century of systematic resistance to the Fifteenth Amendment, Congress might well decide to shift the advantage of time and inertia from the perpetrators of the evil to its victims.

The Court also stressed that there was “reliable evidence of actual voting discrimination in a great majority of the States and political subdivisions affected by the new remedies of the Act.”

Congress amended the VRA to expand its protections in the 1970s after hearings revealed that the electorate was still subject to gerrymandering, at-large elections, and other systematic tools used to exclude the African-American and other minority groups from voting. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the Supreme Court continued to uphold the constitutionality of various VRA provisions. The Act was successfully used to strike down numerous state voter restrictions enacted with racially discriminatory intent, prompting the Justice Department to declare the VRA the most effective piece of civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed.

b. Failure to Provide an Entirely Effective Tool—The 1982 Amendment

Despite the protections to the African-American vote provided by the VRA, the Civil Rights movement suffered another setback with the Supreme Court’s 1980 decision in City of Mobile v. Bolden. In the opinion, the Supreme Court concluded that to prevail on a claim

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111. Id. at 328.
112. Id. at 329.
113. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, supra note 106.
114. See, e.g., City of Rome v. United States, 446 U.S. 156 (1980) (holding that a seven-year extension on the VRA’s preclearance requirement was constitutional); Oregon v. Mitchell, 400 U.S. 112 (1970) (holding that a VRA ban on literacy tests and durational state residency requirements was constitutional).
of minority voting dilution under the VRA of 1965, there must be proof of a racially discriminatory purpose driving the passage of the legislation under review.\(^{117}\) The opinion also stressed that the VRA had “an effect no different from that of the Fifteenth Amendment itself,” which had been interpreted to cover “action by a State that is racially neutral on its face . . . only if motivated by a discriminatory purpose.”\(^{118}\)

In 1982, largely in response to the \textit{City of Mobile} decision, Congress again revised the VRA to establish a “results” test that made clear that discriminatory intent is not necessary to establish a violation of section 2.\(^{119}\) With this amendment, the Act provided that a violation is established when, through the “totality of circumstances,” the impact of a challenged voting practice is discriminatory.\(^{120}\) The Senate report for the 1982 amendment identified “typical factors” that could be relevant in a section 2 analysis, including a history of not only voting discrimination, but discrimination in society at large to the extent such

\(^{117}\) \textit{Id.} at 62. This requirement was acknowledged to be difficult to prove. See \textit{Thornburg v. Gingles}, 478 U.S. 30, 44 (1986) (noting that the discriminatory intent test is “inordinately difficult” to meet (internal quotations omitted)); \textit{Ruiz v. City of Santa Maria}, 160 F.3d 543, 557 (9th Cir. 1998) (noting Congress’s conclusion that the discriminatory intent test demanded by the \textit{City of Mobile} decision was “unnecessarily divisive” and “placed an inordinately difficult burden of proof on plaintiffs” (internal quotations omitted)); see also S. Rep. No. 97-417, at 36 (1982), reprinted in 1982 U.S.C.C.A.N. 177, 214.

\(^{118}\) \textit{City of Mobile}, 446 U.S. at 61, 62.

\(^{119}\) See \textit{Harvey}, supra note 45, at 1176. The revised VRA provides, in part: (a) No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision in a manner which results in a denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color . . . . A violation of subsection (a) of this section is established if, based on the totality of circumstances, it is shown that the political processes leading to nomination or election in the State or political subdivision are not equally open to participation by members of a class of citizens protected by subsection (a) of this section in that its members have less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the political process and to elect representatives of their choice.

\(^{120}\) 42 U.S.C. § 1973 (2000) (emphasis added). This version replaced the original language “to deny or abridge” with “which results in a denial or abridgement.” In \textit{Thornburg v. Gingles}, the Supreme Court outlined key reasons for revision of section 2:

The intent test was repudiated for three principal reasons—it is unnecessarily divisive because it involves charges of racism on the part of individual officials or entire communities, it places an inordinately difficult burden of proof on plaintiffs, and it asks the wrong question. . . . The right question . . . is whether as a result of the challenged practice or structure plaintiffs do not have an equal opportunity to participate in the political processes and to elect candidates of their choice. \textit{Thornburg}, 478 U.S. at 44 (internal quotations and citations omitted).

\(^{120}\) See 42 U.S.C. § 1973(a).
discrimination interferes with a racial minority group’s ability to participate fully in the political process.\textsuperscript{121} In the 1986 case \textit{Thornburg v. Gingles}, the Supreme Court determined that the amended version of the VRA required that the Court employ a “flexible, fact-intensive test for § [1973] violations” and incorporate the factors discussed in the Senate report on the 1982 amendment, which the Court determined to be “neither comprehensive nor exclusive.”\textsuperscript{122} After \textit{Thornburg}, the federal courts allowed section 2 challenges to proceed and conducted a totality of the circumstances analysis in a variety of voting practice challenges.\textsuperscript{123} The amendment of the VRA also provided a clearer opportunity for opponents of felon disenfranchisement to challenge such statutes. In theory, plaintiffs challenging felon disenfranchisement statutes needed to prove only racially discriminatory effects of felon disenfranchisement, and not that such laws were enacted with discriminatory intent.


\begin{enumerate}
  \item the extent of any history of official discrimination in the state or political subdivision that touched the right of the members of the minority group to register, to vote, or otherwise to participate in the democratic process;
  \item the extent to which voting in the elections of the state or political subdivision is racially polarized;
  \item the extent to which the state or political subdivision has used unusually large election districts, majority vote requirements, anti-single shot provisions, or other voting practices or procedures that may enhance the opportunity for discrimination against the minority group;
  \item if there is a candidate slating process, whether the members of the minority group have been denied access to that process;
  \item the extent to which members of the minority group in the state or political subdivision bear the effects of discrimination in such areas as education, employment and health, which hinder their ability to participate effectively in the political process;
  \item whether political campaigns have been characterized by overt or subtle racial appeals;
  \item the extent to which members of the minority group have been elected to public office in the jurisdiction.
\end{enumerate}

Additional factors that in some cases have had probative value as part of plaintiffs’ evidence to establish a violation are: whether there is a significant lack of responsiveness on the part of elected officials to the particularized needs of the members of the minority group[,] whether the policy underlying the state or political subdivision’s use of such voting qualification, prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice or procedure is tenuous. While these enumerated factors will often be the most relevant ones, in some cases other factors will be indicative of the alleged dilution. The cases demonstrate, and the Committee intends that there is no requirement that any particular number of factors be proved, or that a majority of them point one way or the other.

\textit{Id.} (footnotes omitted).

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Thornburg}, 478 U.S. at 45, 46.

\textsuperscript{123} See, e.g., League of United Latin Am. Citizens, Council No. 4434 v. Clements, 986 F.2d 728, 813 (5th Cir. 1993) (holding that a method of electing district court judges violated section 2 of the VRA); McMillan v. Escambia County, 748 F.2d 1037, 1047 (5th Cir. 1984) (finding county at-large elections were a “clear” violation of section 2 of the VRA).
C. Challenges to Felon Disenfranchisement

Limiting the voting rights of convicted felons remained “largely unquestioned” until after 1950. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes began to gain some momentum. Initially, challenges to state felon disenfranchisement laws proceeded primarily under the Fourteenth Amendment as due process and equal protection challenges and did not allege racial discrimination. Those that did make an allegation of racial discrimination underlying a felon disenfranchisement law were initially forced to rely on the Fifteenth Amendment or the original version of the VRA to provide relief, both of which demanded a showing that a felon disenfranchisement law was passed with the intent of discriminating on the basis of race, a difficult element to prove.

The 1982 amendment to the VRA eclipsed the protections of the Fifteenth Amendment and emerged as a potential tool for challenging racially discriminatory felon disenfranchisement laws. While challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws brought under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments largely failed because proving discriminatory intent was difficult, the revision of the VRA in 1982 to employ a “results” test has revived interest in challenging felon disenfranchisement laws. To date, the federal circuit courts are split on whether the VRA’s “results” test can be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes and whether they can be struck down for having a racially discriminatory impact.

1. Early Challenges to the Constitutionality of Felon Disenfranchisement

Much of the debate regarding whether challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws can proceed under the amended section 2 of


125. The success of these challenges was mixed. See, e.g., *Owens v. Barnes*, 711 F.2d 25, 28 (3d Cir. 1983) (holding that the Pennsylvania felon disenfranchisement scheme did not violate equal protection); *Shepherd v. Trevino*, 575 F.2d 1110, 1115 (5th Cir. 1978) (holding that the Texas reenfranchisement scheme for state felons did not violate equal protection). But see Hobson v. Pow, 434 F. Supp. 362, 366-67 (N.D. Ala. 1977) (holding that a misdemeanor disenfranchisement law was arbitrary and violated equal protection).

126. See, e.g., *Jones v. Edgar*, 3 F. Supp. 2d 979, 980 (C.D. Ill. 1998) (holding that the state constitutional provision that denied voting rights to incarcerated felons did not violate the Fifteenth Amendment); see also supra notes 117-19 and accompanying text.

127. One student commentator suggested that “plaintiffs are most likely to succeed in challenging criminal disenfranchisement laws if they allege that these laws violate the Voting Rights Act because they disproportionately affect minorities.” Shapiro, *supra* note 97, at 544.

128. See infra Part II.
the VRA has been shaped by earlier challenges under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the original version of the VRA. In *Richardson v. Ramirez*, the Supreme Court concluded that the Equal Protection Clause does not require states to advance a compelling interest before denying citizens who have been convicted of crimes the right to vote. The Court relied on the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment that appears to authorize felon disenfranchisement in reaching its conclusion that the Constitution explicitly permits states to disenfranchise felons, despite the fact that Section 1 of that same Amendment requires that states do not deny citizens equal protection of the laws. The *Richardson* Court highlighted that “those who framed and adopted the Fourteenth Amendment could not have intended to prohibit outright in § 1 of that Amendment that which was expressly exempted from the lesser sanction of reduced representation imposed by § 2 of the Amendment.” The Court also concluded that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment effectively exempts felon disenfranchisement laws from strict scrutiny and distinguishes them from other types of laws that affect voting rights.

Justice Marshall, dissenting in *Richardson*, argued that equal protection analysis applies in full force to felon disenfranchisement statutes. The crafting of the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, he argued, had nothing to do with authorizing felon disenfranchisement, and had everything to do with the 39th Congress’s fear of increased congressional representation of the southern states. Congress worried, Justice Marshall asserted, that this increased representation “might weaken their own political dominance.” Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, therefore, forced southern states to enfranchise former slaves—who were aligned with the interests of Northern congressmen—or lose representation, he argued, and this constitutional provision was a “compromise.” Therefore, according to Justice Marshall, Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was not intended to limit other

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130. *See U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1. Green v. Board of Elections*, a Second Circuit decision, was the earliest opinion that determined that the text of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment exempted felon disenfranchisement statutes from strict scrutiny review. *Green v. Bd. of Elections*, 380 F.2d 445 (2d Cir. 1967), *cert. denied*, 389 U.S. 1048 (1968); *see Chin, supra* note 25, at 313.
132. *Id.* at 54 (“We hold that the understanding of those who adopted the Fourteenth Amendment ... is of controlling significance in distinguishing such laws from those other state limitations on the franchise which have been held invalid under the Equal Protection Clause by this Court.”).
133. *Id.* at 77-78 (Marshall, J., dissenting).
134. *Id.* at 73.
135. *Id.*
136. *Id.* at 73-74.
sections of the same amendment and did not exempt state felon disenfranchisement practices from strict scrutiny analysis.\textsuperscript{137} 

Despite Justice Marshall’s strong dissent, the majority opinion in \textit{Richardson} continues to dominate the debate over the constitutional permissibility of felon disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{138} The Court’s holding in \textit{Richardson} prompted one scholar to argue that “[a]bsent a Constitutional amendment, constitutional approval of felon disenfranchisement in section 2 [of the Fourteenth Amendment] forever precludes felons from invoking equal protection under section 1, even where the criminal justice system enforces its laws in a racially discriminatory fashion.”\textsuperscript{139} Despite some lower courts’ agreement that \textit{Richardson} effectively “closed the door on the equal protection argument” being applied in felon disenfranchisement challenges, when the challenges alleged that felon disenfranchisement statutes intentionally discriminated on the basis of race, the debate took a new turn.\textsuperscript{140} 

In \textit{Hunter v. Underwood}, decided over a decade after \textit{Richardson}, the Supreme Court concluded that felon disenfranchisement laws that were passed with the intent of discriminating on the basis of race violate the Equal Protection Clause.\textsuperscript{141} The Alabama statute challenged in the case disqualified persons convicted of crimes of moral turpitude from voting, a category of crimes that included minor misdemeanor offenses like petty larceny and omitted more serious offenses such as second-degree manslaughter.\textsuperscript{142} The Court affirmed the lower court’s finding that the Alabama state legislature had deemed crimes of “moral turpitude” as those that warranted disenfranchisement because those crimes were more often committed by African-Americans than by whites.\textsuperscript{143} The Alabama felon disenfranchisement scheme had therefore been passed with racial animus.\textsuperscript{144} 

The \textit{Hunter} opinion, written by Justice Rehnquist who had also written for the majority in \textit{Richardson}, concluded, “we are confident that §2 [of the Fourteenth Amendment] was not designed to permit the purposeful racial discrimination attending the enactment and operation of [the statute being challenged] which otherwise violates §1 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Nothing in our opinion in

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Id.} at 74. 
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{See infra} Parts II.A.1, II.B.1. 
\textsuperscript{139} Portugal, \textit{supra} note 15, at 1325. 
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Hunter}, 471 U.S. at 233. 
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Id.} at 226-27. 
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Id.} at 224, 233. 
\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Id.} at 233.
Richardson v. Ramirez... suggests the contrary.” Other courts embraced the Hunter holding and rejected Richardson’s abandonment of strict scrutiny analysis of felon disenfranchisement laws. In McLaughlin v. City of Canton, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi analyzed the Mississippi legislature’s decision to disenfranchise those who had committed misdemeanor offenses under strict scrutiny rather than the lower-level standard of review set by Richardson. The court concluded that the state had not provided a compelling enough justification for disenfranchising the plaintiff for pleading guilty to a misdemeanor offense, and therefore the felon disenfranchisement regime was a violation of equal protection as applied. The McLaughlin court would not go so far as to hold that the felon disenfranchisement statutory regime was enacted with a racially discriminatory purpose absent a full evidentiary investigation, but left room for such an inquiry. McLaughlin, however, “represents the exception rather than the rule” in its willingness to explore racial animus as a reason to strike down a felon disenfranchisement law.

Other courts have limited the impact of Hunter. In Cotton v. Fordice, the Fifth Circuit held that although Mississippi’s legislature was motivated by a desire to discriminate against African-Americans in enacting its felon disenfranchisement statute, “each amendment [to the felon disenfranchisement statute] superseded the previous provision and removed the discriminatory taint associated with the original version.” The court reached this conclusion despite the fact that the “core of the discriminatory law remained intact.”

145. Id.
146. See id.; supra note 126 and accompanying text.
147. McLaughlin v. City of Canton, 947 F. Supp. 954, 976 (S.D. Miss. 1995) (“Under strict scrutiny, the state must demonstrate a ‘substantial and compelling reason’ for its disenfranchisement of the plaintiff for a misdemeanor false pretenses conviction.”). The McLaughlin court also argued that the “the State cannot choose means that unnecessarily burden or restrict constitutionally protected activity. Statutes affecting constitutional rights must be drawn with ‘precision.’” Id. (quoting NAACP v. Button, 371 U.S. 415, 438 (1963)).
148. Id. at 976-77.
149. Id. at 976-78. The parties had not fully briefed the issue of racially discriminatory intent motivating the felon disenfranchisement framework, so the court only briefly addressed this issue. Id. at 976.
150. The Law of Prisons, supra note 50, at 1952 n.110.
151. See id. at 1951.
152. Cotton v. Fordice, 157 F.3d 388, 391 (5th Cir. 1998).
plaintiff’s challenge to the Mississippi statute therefore failed to satisfy the Hunter standard.

Because the Supreme Court in Richardson concluded that the Equal Protection Clause does not require states to advance a compelling interest before denying convicted citizens the right to vote, courts have consistently held that felon disenfranchisement laws not passed with discriminatory intent do not violate either the Due Process Clause or the Fifteenth Amendment. Until the 1982 amendment, the VRA and the Fifteenth Amendment provided co-extensive protections. Therefore, like the Equal Protection Clause, Due Process Clause, and Fifteenth Amendment, the VRA could only be used to challenge felon disenfranchisement statutes passed with racial animus. When the Act was amended in 1982, opponents of felon disenfranchisement saw a new opportunity to challenge felon disenfranchisement laws that had a racially discriminatory impact but were not passed with a provable discriminatory intent.

2. VRA Challenges to Felon Disenfranchisement Following the 1982 Amendment

With the amendment of section 2 of the VRA in 1982 offering more expansive protections than the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments under which it was authorized, the Act emerged as a possible mechanism for challenging felon disenfranchisement statutes that had only a racially discriminatory impact. The use of the revised VRA in the felon disenfranchisement context, however, has continued to be difficult. As this Note highlights in Part II, recent VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes have not been uniformly decided and the Supreme Court has declined to address the applicability of the revised VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws. Despite the series of successful challenges to other racially discriminatory voting practices that employed the amended section 2 of the VRA, few plaintiffs have succeeded in challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes using the Act.

The first challenge to a felon disenfranchisement law under the revised section 2 of the VRA was the Sixth Circuit case of Wesley v.

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154. See, e.g., City of Mobile v. Bolden, 446 U.S. 55, 65 (1980) (plurality opinion) (holding that an at-large voting system did not violate Fifteenth Amendment); Butts v. City of New York, 779 F.2d 141, 143 n.1 (2d Cir. 1985) (holding that a requirement of run-off election in city primary did not violate Fifteenth Amendment).

155. See generally Shapiro, supra note 97.

156. See generally id.

157. There are two typical claims raised under section 2 of the VRA: (1) vote denial occurs when the ability to vote is denied on account of race; (2) vote dilution occurs when a voting practice diminishes “the force of minority votes that were duly cast and counted.” Holder v. Hall, 512 U.S. 874, 896 (1994) (Thomas, J., concurring in judgment). Courts have often failed to distinguish between vote dilution and vote denial claims. See Shapiro, supra note 97, at 555.
The Wesley plaintiffs alleged that the Tennessee felon disenfranchisement statute under review diluted the African-American vote, and sought to strike it down under section 2 of the VRA. The district court concluded in rejecting the plaintiff’s claim that the statute “does not deny any citizen, ab initio, the equal opportunity to participate in the political process and to elect candidates of their choice. Rather, it is the commission of preascertained, proscribed acts that warrant the state to extinguish certain individuals’ rights” to vote.

The Fourth Circuit also briefly applied the VRA to a felon disenfranchisement statute in Howard v. Gilmore, an unpublished, two-page opinion. The court held that the plaintiff, an incarcerated felon, failed to state a claim under the VRA upon which relief could be granted. In only a few sentences, the court concluded that because the felon disenfranchisement statute in question pre-dated the Fifteenth Amendment (meaning that it could not have been enacted in response to the Fifteenth Amendment) and because the plaintiff failed to demonstrate “any nexus between the disenfranchisement of felons and race,” his claim had to fail.

Wesley and Howard, however, did not mark the end of the use of the amended section 2 of the VRA in the felon disenfranchisement context. Neither of the Wesley and Howard courts’ opinions addressed the permissibility of applying section 2 to felon disenfranchisement laws and merely proceeded under the assumption that such a challenge was permitted. Recent litigation has called this assumption into question.

a. An Overview of the Recent Litigation

Only four cases—Baker and Muntaqim from the Second Circuit, Johnson from the Eleventh Circuit, and Farrakhan from the Ninth Circuit—have specifically explored the permissibility of using the amended section 2 of the VRA in the context of felon disenfranchisement challenges. Each challenge was brought by plaintiffs who were either incarcerated at the time, serving a term of probation or parole, or had already served a term of incarceration. All these plaintiffs asserted that their state felon disenfranchisement statutes violated the amended section 2 of the VRA because they had a racially disparate impact.

158. 605 F. Supp. 802, 804 (M.D. Tenn. 1985), aff’d, 791 F.2d 1255 (6th Cir. 1986).
159. Id.
160. Id. at 813.
162. Id.
163. Id.
164. See infra Part II.
The first of these cases, *Baker*, decided in 1996 by the Second Circuit, sitting en banc, reviewed the district court’s dismissal of the plaintiff’s claim that New York State’s felon disenfranchisement law violated section 2 of the VRA. The ten Second Circuit judges who heard the appeal were deadlocked, issuing three opinions, and ultimately affirming the district court’s dismissal of the plaintiff’s claim. These *Baker* opinions represented the most comprehensive analysis of the application of the amended section 2 of the VRA in a state felon disenfranchisement statute challenge at the time.

In July 2003, the Ninth Circuit had occasion to address this same issue in *Farrakhan*. After a decision allowing the VRA to be applied to the state felon disenfranchisement statute, the defense moved for a hearing en banc, which was denied over a vigorous dissent. On November 8, 2004, the Supreme Court denied certiorari in the case. Only months later, the Eleventh Circuit embraced a similar approach in *Johnson* and permitted the amended section 2 of the VRA to apply in a challenge to Florida’s felon disenfranchisement statutory scheme. The Eleventh Circuit then agreed to rehear this case en banc, and vacated its previous decision.

The Second Circuit recently had an opportunity to re-examine its *Baker* reasoning in 2004’s *Muntaqim*. Unlike in *Baker*, the *Muntaqim* court was not evenly divided, coming out definitively against the use of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges, deepening the circuit split. On October 1, 2004, the Second Circuit rejected one judge’s request that the court rehear the *Muntaqim* case en banc. When the petition for certiorari was

166. *Id.* at 921. Because the bench was evenly divided, the opinions have no precedential effect, and the district court decision was affirmed.
168. 338 F.3d 1009 (9th Cir. 2003).
170. *Locke v. Farrakhan*, 125 S. Ct. 477 (2004) (mem.). Now that the Supreme Court has denied the petition for certiorari, the case will proceed back to the district court for trial, per the instructions of the Ninth Circuit opinion. *See* Mauro, supra note 14.
171. *Johnson v. Governor of Fla.*, 353 F.3d 1287, 1293 (11th Cir. 2003), *reh’g en banc granted*, opinion vacated by 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004).
172. *Johnson*, 377 F.3d at 1163. Oral arguments have been reheard in the case, but no decision has been issued. *See* Greenhouse, supra note 13. The vacated Eleventh Circuit opinion will still be examined in Part II of this Note, as the court’s reasoning is helpful in understanding the current circuit split.
denied, however, the Second Circuit reconsidered and decided to rehear the case en banc without vacating its previous decision.175

These four cases produced numerous opinions—plurality opinions, majority opinions, dissenting opinions, opinions accompanying decisions to grant or deny rehearing en banc, and district court opinions—which have disagreed on the viability of section 2 of the VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws. Moreover, these cases are still in flux, and several may not be resolved in the immediate future. The circuit split, therefore, will continue to develop. Part I.C.2.b of this Note explains the key points of dispute between these opinions, particularly the disagreement over the importance of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, whether the clear statement rule applies to section 2 of the VRA, and whether section 2 of the VRA is congruent and proportional legislation. Part I.C.2.b also discusses the origins of these points of dispute and lays the groundwork for understanding the approaches embraced by the opinions in Baker, Farrakhan, Johnson, and Muntaqim.

b. Understanding Key Points of Dispute

Part II of this Note examines the reasoning of the opinions in these four cases—Baker, Farrakhan, Johnson, and Muntaqim—and explores the circuit split in detail. To better understand the reasoning advanced in the opinions in these four cases it is important to understand the foundations underlying their points of disagreement. Specifically, the application of the amended version of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws in these four cases has raised issues of both constitutional interpretation and federalism that did not surface in the Wesley v. Collins or Howard v. Gilmore decisions.176

Two central related points of dispute emerged in these four cases. First, some opinions gave great weight to the constitutional authorization of felon disenfranchisement in the Fourteenth Amendment.177 The reference to felon disenfranchisement in the actual text of the Constitution, these opinions argued, affords the practice of felon disenfranchisement special, protected status.178 Other opinions deferred less to the textual authorization of felon disenfranchisement in the Fourteenth Amendment, instead giving more credence to the other sections of the Fourteenth Amendment and to the Fifteenth Amendment, which they argued support the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws.179

175. See Muntaqim, 2004 WL 2998551, at *1. Oral argument for the rehearing has been scheduled for April 7, 2005. Id. at *2.
176. See supra notes 158-63 and accompanying text.
177. See infra Part II.A.1.
178. See infra Part II.A.1.
179. See infra Part II.B.1.
Second, the circuits are split on whether application of the amended section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws exceeds congressional authority to legislate under the Civil War Amendments. In a related area of disagreement, the opinions disputed whether the clear statement rule—the rule that Congress must make an unambiguous statement of its intent for legislation to alter the constitutional balance between the states and Congress in order for that legislation to do so—applied to these cases, and whether the legislative history of the 1982 amendment to the VRA indicates the requisite clear statement from Congress of its intent to exceed the normal balance of state and federal power. These opinions were also divided on whether the VRA’s “results test” constitutes “congruent and proportional” legislation. These points of dispute will be described more fully in turn.

i. The Constitutional Conflict

The affirmative constitutional grant of power to states to control election law does not ordinarily exempt state voting restrictions from application of strict scrutiny equal protection analysis. The Supreme Court rejected the idea that states can “impose burdens on the right to vote, where such burdens are expressly prohibited in other constitutional provisions,” including the Equal Protection Clause.

180. See infra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.
181. See infra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.
182. See infra Part II.A.2.
183. The opinions also disagreed about what type of causal connection between the alleged racially discriminatory effect and the disenfranchisement of felons a plaintiff must establish to be successful in a challenge under section 2 of the VRA. Some opinions concluded that felon disenfranchisement statutes are distinct from other voting laws analyzed under the VRA because they lack a sufficient causal link to racial discrimination. See Montaqui v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102 (2d Cir. 2004); Farrakhan v. Washington, 359 F.3d 1116 (9th Cir. 2004) (Kozinski, J., dissenting); Johnson v. Governor of Fla., 353 F.3d 1287 (11th Cir. 2003) (Kravitch, J., dissenting), reh'g en banc granted, opinion vacated by 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004). These opinions embraced the argument asserted in Wesley v. Collins that “[f]elons are not disenfranchised based on any immutable characteristic, such as race, but on their conscious decision to commit an act for which they assume the risks of detection and punishment.” 605 F. Supp. 802, 813 (M.D. Tenn. 1985), aff'd, 791 F.2d 1255 (6th Cir. 1986). Other opinions in these four cases argued that the fact that racial minorities are targeted for prosecution, receive more severe sentences, and are overrepresented in prisons sufficiently supports a causal connection between felon disenfranchisement and a violation of section 2 of the VRA, and that a more stringent requirement would read a higher causation standard into the VRA than the drafters intended. See Johnson, 353 F.3d at 1287; Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1009. The conflict over the causation standard demanded by section 2 of the VRA will undoubtedly continue to develop absent Supreme Court resolution. This area of dispute, however, will not be specifically addressed in this Note, as it is arguably not as extensively developed.

185. Williams v. Rhodes, 393 U.S. 23, 29 (1968); see Rodriguez v. Popular
Chief Justice Rehnquist, writing for the majority in *Richardson v. Ramirez*, recognized the difficulty of applying these concepts in the felon disenfranchisement context. While Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment appears to authorize state felon disenfranchisement practices, the Equal Protection Clause of the same amendment appears to limit the ability of states to impose racially discriminatory laws. In addressing the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, Rehnquist gave that section effect despite the mandates of equal protection:

The legislative history bearing on the meaning of the relevant language of § 2 is scant indeed; the framers of the Amendment were primarily concerned with the effect of reduced representation upon the States, rather than with the two forms of disenfranchisement which were exempted from that consequence by the language with which we are concerned here. Nonetheless, what legislative history there is indicates that this language was intended by Congress to mean what it says.

To bolster his argument, Justice Rehnquist noted the existence of provisions in twenty-nine state constitutions that either prohibited or allowed state legislatures to prohibit those convicted for crimes to vote at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, meaning that the laws could not have been passed in response to the Fourteenth Amendment.

Justice Marshall’s dissent in *Richardson* revealed an alternative approach to understanding the Fourteenth Amendment’s contradictory directives. Concerned about allowing text in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment to guide a determination of the constitutionality of felon disenfranchisement, in light of the Equal Protection Clause, Justice Marshall stated:

The political motivation behind § 2 was a limited one. It had little to do with the purposes of the rest of the Fourteenth Amendment. As one noted commentator explained: “‘It became a part of the Fourteenth Amendment largely through the accident of political exigency rather than through the relation which it bore to the other sections of the Amendment. . . .’” “[I]t seems quite impossible to conclude that there was a clear and deliberate understanding in the House that § 2 was the sole source of national authority to protect voting rights, or that it expressly recognized the states’ power to deny or abridge the right to vote.”

Democratic Party, 457 U.S. 1, 10 (1982) (“[A] citizen has a constitutionally protected right to participate in elections on an equal basis with other citizens in the jurisdiction.” (internal quotations omitted)).

187. See supra notes 95-100 and accompanying text.
188. Richardson, 418 U.S. at 43.
189. Id. at 48.
190. Id. at 74 (Marshall, J., dissenting) (footnotes omitted) (quoting Van Alstyne,
Justice Marshall likewise did not find persuasive the fact that felon disenfranchisement statutes were common in the states at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified. Concepts such as equal protection, he argued, must adapt to changing realities and are “not immutably frozen like insects trapped in Devonian amber.”

Rigid readings of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, therefore, are not appropriate, according to Justice Marshall.

Some of the opinions issued in the four cases discussed in Part II demonstrated reliance on the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment in prohibiting the use the VRA to evaluate felon disenfranchisement statutes. These opinions advocated an originalist approach to the Constitution, and argued that the actual words of the document carry the greatest weight in understanding the overall meaning of the Constitution. They asserted that courts must recognize the importance of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment in section 2 of the VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws as Chief Justice Rehnquist did in *Richardson v. Ramirez*. The mention of felon disenfranchisement in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment itself, these opinions emphasized, gives the states special power to disenfranchise felons, and the practice enjoys protection when considering Congress’s enforcement powers.

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*The Fourteenth Amendment, the “Right” to Vote, and the Understanding of the Thirty-Ninth Congress*, 1965 Sup. Ct. Rev. 33, 43-44 (1965). Prof. Alec C. Ewald notes the following:

Section 2 was enacted with a clear racial purpose: to assess a penalty should resurgent Southern whites disenfranchise black men, while permitting them to do so. [One authority] writes that Section 2 was designed “indirectly to help Negroes in the South without antagonizing whites in the North.” many of whom were unwilling to confront racial discrimination directly at the national level. Abolitionist Wendell Phillips denounced the entire amendment as a “fatal and total surrender” because “it implicitly acknowledged the right of states to limit voting because of race.” The Supreme Court declared implicitly in *Richardson* that this “original understanding” of Section 2 is constitutionally irrelevant. For legal challenges, that is a significant obstacle.

Ewald, *supra* note 18, at 1133-34.

191. *Richardson*, 418 U.S. at 76 (Marshall, J., dissenting) (citing Dillenburg v. Kramer, 469 F.2d 1222, 1226 (9th Cir. 1972)).

192. *Id.* at 78. Justice Marshall noted:

[B]ecause Congress chose to exempt one form of electoral discrimination from the reduction-of-representation remedy provided by § 2 does not necessarily imply congressional approval of this disenfranchisement. By providing a special remedy for disenfranchisement of a particular class of voters in § 2, Congress did not approve all election discriminations to which the § 2 remedy was inapplicable, and such discriminations thus are not forever immunized from evolving standards of equal protection scrutiny.

*Id.* at 75-76.


The opinions opposing this approach argued that allowing Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment to prevail over the rest of the amendment would result in an inherent contradiction. These opinions adhered instead to Justice Marshall’s dissent in *Richardson v. Ramirez*. One critic summarized this core “paradox” of the Fourteenth Amendment:

A constitutional amendment was enacted to support the voting rights of emancipated slaves. The text of this amendment refers to the possibility of disenfranchising people who have committed crimes. Because patterns of law enforcement have changed over the years, because the number of felons convicted has greatly increased and because a large percent of those convicted are black, the policy of felon disenfranchisement sharply reduces the voting rights of African Americans. Thus, a constitutional provision designed in 1868 to improve the political representation of blacks has turned out . . . to have precisely the opposite effect.

Some opinions in the four cases described in Part II of this Note agreed with this understanding and argued that the constitutional language authorizing felon disenfranchisement is not dispositive. Rather, these opinions argued, the text of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment does not permit purposeful racial discrimination to continue in any circumstance. The VRA, the opinions asserted, seeks to weed out such purposeful, invidious discrimination by use of a “results test.”

Scholars have advanced a series of more aggressive arguments regarding the conflict within the Fourteenth Amendment. Some

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196. See infra Part II.B.1.
197. See infra Part II.B.1.
198. Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1901; see Parkes, supra note 32, at 78 n.38. Professor George P. Fletcher also asserted that the issue resolved in *Richardson*, that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment authorizes and endorses the practice of felon disenfranchisement, warrants reconsideration. He emphasized that Marshall’s dissent in *Richardson* highlighted the inherent problems evident in the majority’s approach. Fletcher, supra note 44, at 1903-04. Fletcher also argued that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment must be read in its historical context—that Section 2, like Section 3 and Section 4 of the Amendment, was merely a provision included to address problems presented by the Civil War. Section 2, he argued, “was not meant to provide lasting constitutional guidance.” Id. at 1906.
199. See infra Part II.B.1.
200. See Portugal, supra note 15, at 1331 (arguing that “[t]he Fourteenth Amendment was specifically created to enable the federal government to police states for violations of the constitutional rights of racial minorities”).
201. See infra Part II.B.1.
argued that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment had been completely disregarded by courts prior to the Richardson decision. 203 Others argued that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was effectively repealed by the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. 204 John Hart Ely asserted that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment has been “no big deal” in practice, and that “Congress has never invoked it.” 205 Accordingly, lending legitimacy to Rehnquist’s reading in Richardson v. Ramirez would give legitimacy to a practice that is out of date. 206

203. Ewald argued that the Supreme Court’s “previous disregard for Section 2, together with subsequent Amendments and the Court’s interpretation of those Amendments, have effectively made Section 2 a dead letter.” Ewald, supra note 18, at 1070. He continued: “Scholars today refer to Section 2 as an obsolete and never enforced provision, and a never-exercised tool; it is a Reconstruction-era measure[ ] of no lasting significance, which is no longer operative and has never had a practical impact.” Id. at 1070-71 (internal quotations and footnotes omitted). He also assessed the impact of the Richardson decision: “[T]he Court plucked a phrase from a long-somnolent sentence and breathed new life into it, reading the Fourteenth Amendment in isolation from subsequent Amendments and constitutional jurisprudence. The result was a ruling which cannot be coherently reconciled with a generation of Supreme Court decisions protecting voting rights.” Id. at 1071-72; see Chin, supra note 25, at 304 (“After a century of vigorous nonenforcement, and just as the ink was drying on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Section 2 was revived as a justification not to subject felon disenfranchisement laws to equal protection scrutiny.”). 204. See Chin, supra note 25. Chin argued that because Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was intended by Congress to be repealed by the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, it cannot provide textual support for felon disenfranchisement, and the courts that analyze felon disenfranchisement challenges under the VRA are wrong to rely on Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment as it is a “nonexistent constraint.” Id. at 316. He also argued that after 1870, it appeared that the Constitution had “two provisions regulating the same subject. Section 2 reduced the basis of representation for racial disenfranchisement, and the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited racial disenfranchisement.” Id. at 272. The Fifteenth Amendment, “Congress’s last word on African-American suffrage,” did not give an express authorization of felon disenfranchisement as Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment had. Id. at 315; see Parkes, supra note 32, at 78 (“Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was rendered largely superfluous by the Fifteenth Amendment.”). 205. John Hart Ely, Interclausal Immunity, 87 Va. L. Rev. 1185, 1195 (2001). 206. John Hart Ely argued:

We know perfectly well, for example, that most of the [Fourteenth Amendment’s framers and ratifiers] did not believe that they were invalidating racially segregated schools either, but it would be next to impossible today to find a judge or commentator who believes for that reason that Brown v. Board of Education was incorrectly decided. Not everything that was assumed to be constitutional in 1868 remains immune to the Equal Protection Clause (assuming it ever was) and Section 2 says nothing stronger on the subject of denying felons the franchise than that in 1868 it was assumed to be constitutional.

Id.
ii. State Authority and Congress’s Enforcement Powers—The Balance of Power

Under the Constitution, judicial authority to determine the constitutionality of state laws is based on the concept that “powers of the legislature are defined and limited; and that those limits may not be mistaken, or forgotten, the constitution is written.”207 In the area of the Civil War Amendments, Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment and Section 2 of the Fifteenth Amendment define the scope of Congress’s enforcement powers.208 “Legislation which deters or remedies constitutional violations can fall within the sweep of Congress’ enforcement power even if in the process it prohibits conduct which is not itself unconstitutional and intrudes into ‘legislative spheres of autonomy previously reserved to the States.’”209 Congress’s enforcement powers are not without limitation.210 Legislation under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments can only “secure to all persons the enjoyment of perfect equality of civil rights and the equal protection of the laws against State denial or invasion, if not prohibited.”211

The most critical point of disagreement between the circuits in the four recent cases addressing the applicability of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws is whether that application exceeds Congress’s enforcement powers under Section 2 of the Fifteenth Amendment and Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Because the VRA is legislation passed pursuant to the Civil War Amendments, it must meet the standards established for enforcement power legislation.212

208. The Fourteenth Amendment provides, in relevant part: “The Congress shall have power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.” U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 5. The Fifteenth Amendment provides, in relevant part: “The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” U.S. Const. amend. XV, § 2.
211. Ex parte Virginia, 100 U.S. 339, 346 (1879).
212. See infra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2. The enforcement powers of Congress under the Civil War Amendments is limited, and Congress: (1) may not repeal Constitutional provisions with such legislation; (2) cannot strip states of the power of self-governance and convert the government into one of “unrestrained authority”; and (3) may only
Some of the opinions in the four cases adhered to the view that the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws exceeds Congress’s enforcement powers because it upsets the delicate balance between state and federal power in the areas of criminal and election law, which are traditionally under the authority of states. Some of these opinions concluded that allowing challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes under the VRA to proceed will call the constitutionality of the Act into question because it would push the boundaries of congressional enforcement power too far. These opinions expressed fear that an interpretation of the VRA that allows for challenging the validity of felon disenfranchisement statutes may result in the Supreme Court striking down “all but the most limited applications of Section 2 [of the VRA].”

Other opinions in these four cases, however, decided that application of the “results test” of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes does not exceed Congress’s enforcement powers under the Civil War Amendments. These opinions argued that the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws is legitimate congressional action designed to ensure that states comply with the mandates of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

This dispute between the circuits becomes more complicated when one considers whether or not the clear statement rule applies to the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges. Gregory v. Ashcroft, a leading case on the clear statement rule, concluded that the statutory rule of construction applies to both Commerce Clause legislation, as well as legislation under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment. In that case, the Court held that Congress may use its exercise its enforcement powers with “appropriate legislation.”

exercise its enforcement powers with “appropriate legislation.” Portugal, supra note 15, at 1331-32 (internal quotations omitted).

213. See infra Part II.A.2. Gabriel Chin argued that the Fifteenth Amendment, unlike the Fourteenth Amendment, “gave no deference to state authority over suffrage.” Chin, supra note 25, at 272. He also argued that “[t]he modern Supreme Court pays lip service to the idea that ‘the States have the power to impose voter qualifications.’ In practice, however, voter qualifications have been almost wholly federalized.” Id. at 308-09 (quoting Dunn v. Blumstein, 405 U.S. 330, 336 (1972)).

214. See infra Part II.A.2.

215. The Law of Prisons, supra note 50, at 1957. That article argued that those advocating for the end of felon disenfranchisement might achieve more favorable results by focusing on legislative action and not the judicial process. Id. at 1957-63.

216. See infra Part II.B.2.

217. See infra Part II.B.2.

218. The clear statement rule is sometimes referred to as the plain statement rule.

219. Gregory v. Ashcroft, 501 U.S. 452, 467-68 (1991). Gregory considered the application of the Federal Age Discrimination Employment Act to Missouri’s mandatory retirement policy for judges. The court concluded that Congress had not made it unmistakably clear that it intended to interfere with Missouri legislators’ judgments requiring the age qualifications of judges. Id. Some courts have identified two slightly different standards for what circumstances invoke the clear statement rule. NLRB v. Catholic Bishop, which reviewed the National Labor Relations Board’s exercise of power, was one of the primary cases advancing the clear
delegated powers to “upset the usual constitutional balance of federal and state powers” only when it makes its intent to do so “unmistakably clear in the language of the statute.”

Chisom v. Roemer, decided the same day as Gregory v. Ashcroft, did not embrace the clear statement rule. The Chisom majority opinion held that section 2 of the VRA applies to the election of state judges but did not seek to discern whether the clear statement rule applied to the Act, failing to even mention the rule. Only Justice Scalia, dissenting, noted the absence of the rule:

[W]e tacitly rejected a “plain statement” rule as applied to the unamended §2 in City of Rome v. United States, though arguably that was before the rule had developed the significance it currently has. I am content to dispense with the “plain statement” rule in the present cases—but it says something about the Court’s approach to this decision that the possibility of applying that rule never crossed its mind.

He also conceded, “[w]hile the ‘plain statement’ rule may not be applicable, there is assuredly nothing whatever that points in the opposite direction, indicating that the ordinary meaning here should not be applied.”

As the cases described in Part II of this Note reveal, there is a deep divide over whether the clear statement rule applies in a section 2 of the VRA challenge to a state felon disenfranchisement statute. Some opinions argued that Gregory v. Ashcroft demands that the clear statement rule and required only that an act of Congress alter the balance of power between the federal and state governments for the rule to apply. NLRB v. Catholic Bishop, 440 U.S. 490 (1979). Gregory, unlike Catholic Bishop, suggested that a statute must also be “ambiguous” before the clear statement rule applies. See Muntaqim v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102, 126-28 (2d Cir.) (discussing the differences between these two rules), cert. denied, Muntaqim v. Coombe, 125 S. Ct. 480 (2004) (mem.), reh’g en banc granted, Muntaqim v. Coombe, No. 01-7260, 2004 WL 2998551 (2d Cir. Dec. 29, 2004).

221. Id. (quoting Will v. Mich. Dep’t of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 65 (1989)); see Calvin R. Massey, Etiquette Tips: Some Implications of “Process Federalism,” 18 Harv. J.L. & Pub. Pol’y 175, 192 (1994) (noting that the clear statement rule is derived from the “requirement imposed upon Congress when it seeks to abrogate state immunity from suit under the Eleventh Amendment, or when Congress assertedly pre-empts the historic powers of the States, or when Congress intends to enforce the guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment upon states” (internal quotations and footnotes omitted)).
223. Id. at 404. Chisom addressed the same provision of the VRA under review in the four felon disenfranchisement statute challenges described in detail in Part II of this Note. See Nickolai G. Levin, Constitutional Statutory Synthesis, 54 Ala. L. Rev. 1281, 1365 (2003) (arguing that “[i]f state autonomy of process interests are important, they should be acknowledged uniformly, even if they are occasionally trumped by national policies such as the VRA” (internal quotations omitted)).
224. Chisom, 501 U.S. at 412 (Scalia, J., dissenting) (citations omitted).
225. Id.
statement rule must be invoked in such cases. These opinions also argued that because the clear statement rule applies, the court must examine the congressional intent behind the VRA. These opinions concluded that the legislative history of the VRA, including the record for the 1982 amendment, does not indicate a clear intent from Congress that the Act should apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes, and therefore it cannot apply.

Other opinions in the four cases argued that the clear statement rule does not apply to section 2 of the VRA because there is not sufficient ambiguity in the Act’s language to trigger it, and because Chisom v. Roemer did not employ it. According to these opinions, the clear statement rule only applies in certain cases and to certain types of legislation. The Chisom majority’s silence on the clear statement rule was dispositive in these opinions and supported the idea that the clear statement rule does not apply to legislation passed pursuant to the Fourteenth Amendment. Those opinions adhering to the opposite view asserted that the clear statement rule was either overlooked or merely forgotten by the Justices deciding Chisom. Opinions that did not embrace the clear statement rule also consistently argued that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments already altered the state/federal balance of power, and the VRA’s application to felon disenfranchisement statutes does nothing to further alter this balance.

226. See infra Part II.A.2.a.
227. See infra Part II.B.2.a.
228. See infra Part II.A.2.a.
229. See Portug. supra note 15, at 1331 (“Given the constitutional foundation upon which the Act relies, I suggest the ‘plain statement’ rule is redundant as applied to the Voting Rights Act.”); infra notes 355-66 and accompanying text. For an alternative argument, see Michael P. Lee, Comment, How Clear is “Clear”?: A Lenient Interpretation of the Gregory v. Ashcroft Clear Statement Rule, 65 U. Chi. L. Rev. 255 (1998), which argues for a “lenient” clear statement rule, and notes that while the interests protected by the Gregory rule are important, they “must be weighed against the harm that an overly stringent rule may cause.” Id. at 258. This proposed approach, he argued “provides sufficient protection for state sovereignty while providing Congress the power to utilize its limited resources efficiently.” Id.
230. See infra notes 355-77 and accompanying text.
231. See id.
232. See id.
233. See infra Part II.B.2. One student commentator argued that the clear statement rule should not be a consideration when interpreting the VRA’s reach, because the Supreme Court consistently has recognized that Congress has the power to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments through the Voting Rights Act, despite the burdens those measures placed on the states. . . . The Voting Rights Act is a byproduct of the Civil War Amendments, which inevitably altered the federal/state balance of power as contemplated by the original Constitution. Additionally, since the Civil War there have been six Constitutional amendments specifically designed to increase participation in the vote.

Portugal, supra note 15, at 1331 (internal quotations omitted).
Another issue that arose in these four cases, in a somewhat more limited manner, was whether the VRA is adequately “congruent” and “proportional” legislation under the Civil Rights Amendments. In City of Boerne v. Flores, the Supreme Court held that Congress’s enforcement powers under these Amendments could be exercised only when doing so would be congruent and proportional. In noting that Congress’s enforcement powers are not unlimited, the Court in City of Boerne concluded that “[t]he design of the [Fourteenth] Amendment and the text of § 5 [of the Fourteenth Amendment] are inconsistent with the suggestion that Congress has the power to decree the substance of the Fourteenth Amendment’s restrictions on the States. . . . Congress does not enforce a constitutional right by changing what the right is.” The Court noted that while Congress must have broad power to remedy a constitutional violation, there still “must be a congruence and proportionality between the injury to be prevented or remedied and the means adopted to that end.” Additionally, the Court demanded that Congress identify a pattern and history of discrimination by the states in order for legislation to fit the congruence and proportionality requirement. Because the VRA has met these requirements, the Supreme Court has consistently held that it is congruent and proportional legislation.

Some opinions described in Part II were split on whether application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws would violate the congruence and proportionality requirement. Some argued that an interpretation of section 2 of the VRA that allows it “to prohibit felon disenfranchisement might sweep too broadly to

234. See infra Part II.A.2.b.
236. Id. at 519.
237. Id. at 520.
238. See id. at 531-32. The Supreme Court has specifically distinguished the VRA from other federal legislation as being congruent and proportional, in part, because it has the requisite congressional record of racial discrimination in voting practices. See, e.g., Bd. of Trs. of the Univ. of Ala. v. Garrett, 531 U.S. 356, 368-70, 373 (2001) (distinguishing the VRA from the Americans with Disabilities Act and noting the failure to demonstrate that Congress had a record of a pattern of employment discrimination by the states against the disabled); Fla. Prepaid Postsecondary Educ. Expense Bd. v. Coll. Sav. Bank, 527 U.S. 627, 640 (1999) (distinguishing the VRA from the Patent Remedy Act); City of Boerne, 521 U.S. at 530-31 (distinguishing the VRA from the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (“RFRA”) and holding that the RFRA was not congruent and proportional in part because the legislative record did not adequately demonstrate a pattern of unconstitutional conduct).
239. See, e.g., Mixon v. Ohio, 193 F.3d 389, 398 (6th Cir. 1999) (concluding that the VRA is a valid exercise of congressional authority); United States v. Marengo County Comm’n, 731 F.2d 1546, 1550 (11th Cir. 1984) (holding that the amended section 2 of the VRA is constitutional); Jones v. City of Lubbock, 727 F.2d 364, 372-75 (5th Cir. 1984) (holding that section 2 of the VRA’s “results” test is appropriate legislation under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments).
240. See infra Part II.A.2.b.
satisfy the Boerne congruence and proportionality test." A related criticism was that allowing section 2 of the VRA to prevail in the felon disenfranchisement context would result in the overturning of many existing state laws, rendering it disproportionate. Other opinions took an alternative approach and argued that the VRA is clearly congruent and proportional legislation and that no court has ever held otherwise.

II. CHALLENGING FELON DISENFRANCHISEMENT UNDER THE VRA: DISPUTING THE IMPORTANCE OF SECTION 2 OF THE FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT AND THE APPROPRIATE BALANCE OF STATE AND FEDERAL POWER

Since the VRA was amended in 1982, only four federal circuit court cases have directly addressed whether section 2 of the VRA should apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes. The outcomes of these cases have serious implications. If such challenges are permitted to proceed and plaintiffs can successfully prove that these laws result in a racially disparate impact, the states where felon disenfranchisement has the most racially disparate effects could see their statutes declared impermissible.

To date, however, the federal circuit courts have not uniformly held that section 2 of the VRA can apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes. Instead, a circuit split has developed, with the Second Circuit on one side of the debate, and the Ninth Circuit on the other. It is unclear which side of the debate the Eleventh Circuit will ultimately join, as its previous decision in Johnson to permit section 2 of the VRA to be applied to Florida’s felon disenfranchisement law, was recently vacated and granted rehearing en banc. Similarly, because the Second Circuit has decided to rehear Muntaqim, its position in the circuit split is also questionable.

As illustrated in Part I of this Note, the points of disagreement between the circuits are serious and numerous and may not be resolved without Supreme Court action. This part describes the disputed issues that currently divide the circuits in greater detail and

242. See id. at 1954.
243. See infra Part II.B.2.
244. It is not yet clear what statistical evidentiary showing would be required to prove a racially disparate impact. See Muntaqim v. Coombe, No. 01-7260, 2004 WL 2998551, at *1 (2d Cir. Dec. 29, 2004) (requesting the parties brief the issue).
245. Johnson v. Governor of Fla., 353 F.3d 1287 (11th Cir. 2003), reh’g en banc granted, opinion vacated by 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004).
246. This Note will explore the reasoning in the vacated Eleventh Circuit opinion in Johnson v. Governor of Florida. While this opinion no longer has precedential value, its reasoning is useful in framing the current debate between the circuits. See supra note 172.
highlight the reasoning employed in Baker, Muntaqim, Johnson, and Farrakhan. Part II.A explains the analysis advanced by the opinions that conclude that section 2 of the VRA cannot be applied to felon disenfranchisement laws. These opinions argue that applying section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes would contradict the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment and would upset the balance of state and federal power. Part II.B explains the rationale advanced by the opinions that determine that section 2 of the VRA can be applied to felon disenfranchisement laws. These opinions maintain that racially discriminatory voting laws cannot be sustained, regardless of the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, and that application of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes does not upset the balance of state and federal power.

A. Opinions Rejecting the Application of Section 2 of the VRA in Felon Disenfranchisement Statute Challenges

The Second Circuit, in the prevailing Baker opinion and in the Muntaqim opinion, concluded that section 2 of the VRA cannot be applied in challenges to state felon disenfranchisement statutes.

248. Baker v. Pataki, 85 F.3d 919 (2d Cir. 1996). The action in Baker was brought by African-American and Hispanic incarcerated felons, who alleged that New York’s felon disenfranchisement provision disproportionately deprived African-Americans and Hispanics of the right to vote, resulting in a violation of section 2 of the VRA. Id. at 923. The plaintiffs alleged, in part, that African-American and Hispanics comprise approximately 22% of the New York state population, but comprise 82% of the New York State prison population, and that a state Chief Judge-commissioned study on the presence and effect of racism in the state court system revealed that there was a racial disparity in conviction rates and sentence types. Id. The district court opinion concluded that since the plaintiffs lost the right to vote because of their decision to commit a crime, and not their race, the disproportionate racial impact of felon disenfranchisement did not itself establish a violation of section 2 of the VRA, “absent other reasons to find discrimination.” Baker v. Cuomo, 842 F. Supp. 718, 722 (S.D.N.Y. 1993), vacated by reh’g en banc sub nom. Baker, 85 F.3d at 919. Because the Second Circuit was deadlocked in its decision, the district court’s decision to dismiss the plaintiffs’ complaint was affirmed. The first opinion in the Second Circuit’s decision, authored by Judge Mahoney, which agreed with the district court’s dismissal, is referred to as the “prevailing” opinion in this Note. Baker, 85 F.3d at 921.


250. Both Baker and Muntaqim challenged New York’s felon disenfranchisement statute, § 5-106(2)-(5), which provides, in part:

No person who has been convicted of a felony pursuant to the laws of this state, shall have the right to register for or vote at any election unless he shall have been pardoned or restored to the rights of citizenship by the governor, or his maximum sentence of imprisonment has expired, or he has been discharged from parole.

N.Y. Elec. Law § 5-106(2) (McKinney 2005); see also id. § 5-106(3)-(5).
Both the prevailing *Baker* and *Muntaqim* opinions reasoned that allowing such challenges to proceed would cause a serious constitutional conflict between the different sections of the Fourteenth Amendment, interfere with the balance of state and federal power in the area of voting law, allow Congress to exceed its enforcement authority under the Civil War Amendments, and run afoul of both the clear statement rule and the legislative intent accompanying the VRA’s enactment in 1965 and amendment in 1982. The dissenting opinion in the decision to deny a rehearing en banc in the Ninth Circuit’s *Farrakhan* opinion, as well as the dissenting opinion in *Johnson*, also advanced these arguments.

1. The Equal Protection Clause Cannot Trump Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment

The prevailing opinion in the Second Circuit’s *Baker* opinion opposed the use of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges, in part, because of the potency of the constitutional authorization of felon disenfranchisement in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Richardson v. Ramirez*, the opinion asserted, properly advanced the idea that the drafters of the Fourteenth Amendment could not have intended to authorize both felon disenfranchisement and simultaneously allow for its prohibition by the Equal Protection Clause within the same Amendment.


252. *Johnson v. Governor of Florida* (originally *Johnson v. Bush*) was brought against the Florida Clemency Board by a class of ex-felons in Florida who had completed all terms of their incarceration, probation, and parole, challenging the Florida constitutional provision that denies them the right to vote. *Johnson v. Governor of Fla.*, 353 F.3d 1287, 1293 (11th Cir. 2003), *reh’g en banc granted, opinion vacated by* 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004). Florida is one of the few states that permanently disenfranchises felons unless they receive clemency. See Fla. Const. art. VI, § 4.

253. *Baker v. Pataki*, 85 F.3d 919 (2d Cir. 1996). The opinion opposing the application of section 2 of the VRA in *Baker* originated many of the arguments embraced in *Muntaqim*, as well as the dissent in *Johnson* and the dissent in the *Farrakhan* court’s decision not to rehear the case en banc.


In emphasizing this argument, the prevailing opinion in *Baker* first noted that twenty-nine of the thirty-six states that ratified the Fourteenth Amendment had existing provisions in their constitutions that allowed for prohibiting felon voting at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified. The opinion argued that this fact could only indicate that the limitations on states imposed by the Civil War Amendments were not meant to apply to the state practice of felon disenfranchisement. The opinion distinguished felon disenfranchisement from other voting restrictions enacted with racial animus for this reason. The House record accompanying the 1965 version of the VRA stated, the opinion noted, “apparently no Southern State required proof of literacy, understanding of constitutional provisions or of the obligations of citizenship, or good moral character, as prerequisites to voting. However, . . . these tests and devices were soon to appear in most of the States with large Negro populations.” Unlike felon disenfranchisement, these other racially discriminatory voting restrictions did not exist prior to the ratification of the Civil War Amendments and are therefore more clearly the type of state laws intended to be covered by the protections of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

The prevailing *Baker* opinion admitted that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, along with the VRA, infringe in a significant manner upon state power when racial discrimination motivating a law’s enactment is “apparent,” but argued that felon disenfranchisement statutes are distinguished because they have a “long history and have been accorded explicit constitutional recognition.” The opinion argued that “an explicit constitutional balance has been struck by the mandate in § 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment.” States, the opinion also emphasized, have the “primary responsibility” for regulating federal, state, and local elections, as well as “for defining and enforcing” criminal law, and this must be respected when states implement felon disenfranchisement schemes.

The Second Circuit’s opinion in *Muntaqim* also denied that the VRA should apply in a challenge to New York’s felon disenfranchisement statute, in part, because of the explicit constitutional authorization of felon disenfranchisement in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Additionally, the opinion argued,

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256. *Id.* at 928.
257. *Id.*
259. *Id.* at 931.
260. *Id.*
261. *Id.*
262. *Id.* (internal quotations omitted).
“Congress did not wholly abandon its focus on purposeful discrimination” with the 1982 amendment to the VRA. While noting that the Fourteenth Amendment does not permit state felon disenfranchisement laws to intentionally disenfranchise African-Americans, the Muttaqim opinion nonetheless determined that it would be “anomalous” for those that ratified the Fourteenth Amendment to specifically permit felon disenfranchisement without demanding a showing of discriminatory intent before allowing such laws to be struck down.

The Muttaqim opinion also gave credence to the “longstanding practice” of felon disenfranchisement as a method of punishment for committing a crime. The number of states with such statutes on the books before the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were ratified, the opinion emphasized, indicates that the statutes were not enacted in response to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but rather to punish criminals. The opinion made clear, however, that it was not calling the constitutional validity of the VRA’s “results test” into question. Rather, because the practice of felon disenfranchisement existed before the Civil War, and because the practice is sanctioned in the text of the Fourteenth Amendment itself, the VRA is not intended to apply to these particular types of state laws. Application of the VRA to other laws restricting individual voting rights, however, was permissible in the eyes of the Muttaqim opinion.

The dissenting opinion in the decision to deny a rehearing en banc in the Ninth Circuit’s Farrakhan opinion articulated perhaps the most ominous warning regarding application of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges. “This is a dark day for the Voting Rights Act,” the dissenting opinion began. “In adopting a constitutionally questionable interpretation of the Act, the panel lays the groundwork for the dismantling of the most important piece of civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.” The majority panel opinion, the dissent argued, should have respected the language of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment and permitted the entire court to reconsider the case en banc. The dissent further claimed


264. Id. at 117.
265. Id. at 122.
266. Id. at 123.
267. Id.
268. Id. at 121 (citations omitted).
269. Id. at 123.
270. Id. at 129.
272. Id. at 1116-17.
273. Id. at 1117.
that because felon disenfranchisement laws are endorsed by Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, they are “presumptively constitutional.” Therefore, the dissenting opinion concluded, only those felon disenfranchisement laws enacted with racial animus can be reached by the VRA, and no others.

The forceful dissent in the Eleventh Circuit’s Johnson opinion also noted that the text of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment exempts felon disenfranchisement statutes from VRA review. The Supreme Court in Richardson v. Ramirez, the opinion argued, had already “unambiguously” determined that felon disenfranchisement is not an equal protection violation without a showing of racially discriminatory intent. The dissent worried specifically that allowing the VRA to be used to strike down a state law that is not unconstitutional “creates a constitutional problem because such an interpretation allows a congressional statute to trump the text of the Constitution.”

Ultimately, the prevailing opinion in Baker, the opinion in Muntaqim, the dissenting opinion in Johnson, and the dissenting opinion in Farrakhan each relied on the holding of the Supreme Court in Richardson v. Ramirez that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment protects the practice of felon disenfranchisement from strict equal protection analysis. This textual authorization is bolstered, these opinions agreed, by the existence of felon disenfranchisement statutes prior to ratification of the Civil War Amendments, which indicates that they could not have been passed with racial animus, a prerequisite to permitting application of the amended section 2 of the VRA.

2. The Balance of State and Federal Power Cannot Tip in Favor of Congress

These same opinions also agreed that the VRA’s scope is no wider than that of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments under which it was passed. Despite the Act’s amendment in 1982 to implement a “results test,” these opinions insisted that a showing of racially discriminatory intent is still demanded. Without confining the VRA to the breadth of the Civil War Amendments, its application could exceed Congress’s enforcement powers and infringe on states’ rights.

The prevailing Baker opinion concluded that the application of section 2 of the VRA to New York’s felon disenfranchisement law
“would raise serious constitutional questions regarding the scope of Congress’ authority to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments . . . and would alter the usual constitutional balance between the States and the Federal Government.” The opinion suggested that the “results test” itself may be an invalid exercise of Congress’s powers:

[I]t is unclear whether, as a general rule, the “results” methodology of § 1973 is constitutionally valid. As our discussion of the relevant case law makes clear, the Supreme Court has never authorized an uncircumscribed application of the “results” methodology of § 1973 in furtherance of the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and it is the uncertainty concerning the outer limits of Congress’ enforcement powers that raises the serious constitutional questions at issue in this case.

Such a disruption of federalism principles is intolerable, the opinion concluded.

The Second Circuit’s opinion in Muntaqim relied heavily on the prevailing opinion in Baker to guide its discussion of the scope of congressional enforcement power under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The Muntaqim opinion, however, went a step further, noting “our task here is not simply to choose the opinion in Baker that we consider most persuasive,” because “over the last seven years, the Supreme Court has substantially clarified the scope of Congress’ enforcement power under the Reconstruction Amendments,” making it the duty of the court to reassess the issue. In the years since Baker, the opinion concluded, the Supreme Court has “introduced an entirely new framework” for analyzing Congress’s enforcement power under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment.

280. Id. at 928 n.12.
281. See id. at 931.
283. Id.
284. Id.
285. Id. The opinion briefly reviewed the relevant case law that had developed in the eight years since Baker, highlighting two cases that particularly revealed that the balance of federal/state power had been “significantly refined” since Baker. Id. at 120. In City of Boerne v. Flores the Supreme Court determined that Congress’s enforcement powers may be exercised only in order to respond to a pattern of constitutional violations with a congruent and proportional remedy. City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507, 520 (1997) (analyzing the RFRA); see infra Part II.A.2.b (discussing in more depth the congruence and proportionality requirement). In Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama v. Garrett, 531 U.S. 356 (2001), the Supreme Court determined that Congress cannot exercise its enforcement powers under the Fourteenth Amendment unless it has identified a pattern and history of violations of judicially protected rights by the state.
This new framework, the *Muntaqim* opinion argued, does not support the use of the revised version of section 2 of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges.\(^{286}\) Rather, the opinion argued, it is now clear that this “would infringe upon the states’ well-established discretion to deprive felons of the right to vote” and impermissibly alter the balance of power between Congress and the states.\(^{287}\) Additionally, because states have primary authority for criminal law and election law (particularly state election law), the issue of the state/federal balance of power becomes the central inquiry.\(^{288}\) If a state uses the disenfranchisement of felons as an aspect of punishment, then the application of the VRA to such a statute would upset state/federal power relating to jurisdiction over criminal law.\(^{289}\)

The dissenting opinion in the decision to deny a rehearing en banc in the Ninth Circuit’s *Farrakhan* case also determined that application of the VRA to Washington’s felon disenfranchisement law exceeded congressional authority.\(^{290}\) The opinion concluded that such an abrogation of state authority also unnecessarily called the Act’s constitutionality directly into question.\(^{291}\) Relying on the prevailing opinion in *Baker*, the opinion concluded that there is only a small group of felon disenfranchisement laws, “those enacted with an invidious, racially discriminatory purpose,” that are permissibly struck down by congressional action under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.\(^{292}\) Because Washington’s felon disenfranchisement laws did not demonstrate the requisite history of racial discrimination underlying their enactment for the express purpose of undermining the Civil War Amendments, they are not under the VRA’s purview.\(^{293}\)

The dissent also argued that the majority panel failed to address the fact that the VRA was “never intended” to apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes.\(^{294}\) Therefore, the dissent concluded, the

\(^{286}\) *Muntaqim*, 366 F.3d at 104. Recognizing that the “results test” of the VRA requires a plaintiff to prove only that he was subject to intentional discrimination at sentencing and not that the felon disenfranchisement statute was enacted with an intentionally discriminatory purpose does little, the *Muntaqim* opinion argued, to address whether the results test itself adheres to the correct balance of state and federal power. *Id.*

\(^{287}\) *Id.*

\(^{288}\) *Id.* at 122.

\(^{289}\) *Id.*

\(^{290}\) *Farrakhan* v. Washington, 359 F.3d 1116, 1121 (9th Cir. 2004) (Kozinski, J., dissenting).

\(^{291}\) *Id.*

\(^{292}\) *Id.*

\(^{293}\) *Id.* at 1122. This argument was bolstered by the fact that the felon disenfranchisement law was enacted before the Civil War Amendments were ratified. *Id.*

\(^{294}\) *Id.* at 1120. The legislative record for the Act’s passage and amendment in 1982 both support the conclusion that the Act was not intended to reach this type of case, the dissent reasoned. *See id.* at 1120-21. This dissent also recognized that in 1993
The dissenting opinion argued that VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes require application of this rule. The opinion also argued that the rule specifically "requires a clear statement by Congress in support of the statutory interpretation posing the constitutional question, a statement manifestly lacking in this case." The opinion relied heavily on the fact that it is not "unmistakably clear that, in amending § 1973 in 1982 to incorporate the 'results' test, Congress intended that the test be applicable to felon disenfranchisement statutes."

In light of concerns about whether the amended version of section 2 of the VRA as applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes is within the scope of Congress's enforcement powers under the Civil War Amendments, the prevailing opinion in Baker stressed the need to invoke the clear statement rule. Summoning first the rule set forth in NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago, that the "affirmative intention of the Congress [be] clearly expressed" before a court should uphold a federal intrusion into an area of traditional state control, the opinion argued that VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes require application of this rule. The opinion also argued that the rule specifically "requires a clear statement by Congress in support of the statutory interpretation posing the constitutional question, a statement manifestly lacking in this case." The opinion relied heavily on the fact that it is not "unmistakably clear that, in amending § 1973 in 1982 to incorporate the 'results' test, Congress intended that the test be applicable to felon disenfranchisement statutes."
The prevailing Baker opinion also relied on the Supreme Court’s decision in Gregory v. Ashcroft\(^{302}\) to support its argument that the clear statement rule applies, although that case required the application of the rule to age discrimination legislation enacted pursuant to the Commerce Clause and did not address the VRA specifically.\(^{303}\) The opinion highlighted the Gregory opinion’s statement that: “‘[W]e will not attribute to Congress an intent to intrude on state governmental functions regardless of whether Congress acted pursuant to its Commerce Clause powers or § 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment.’”\(^{304}\) Justices White and Stevens concluded in separate opinions in Gregory that “‘[t]he plain statement rule will apply with full force to legislation enacted to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment.’”\(^{305}\) Therefore, the prevailing opinion in Baker argued, the Gregory rule applies to the VRA, since it is legislation Congress enacted under its Fourteenth Amendment enforcement powers.\(^{306}\)

The prevailing Baker opinion did acknowledge, however, that Chisom v. Roemer, a case involving the VRA and decided the same day as Gregory, did not incorporate the clear statement rule.\(^{307}\) The prevailing Baker opinion explained this omission with Justice Scalia’s statement that it was “‘curious[’] that the Court applied the plain statement rule in Gregory but not in Chisom,” and agreed with Scalia’s assumption that nothing in the Chisom decision indicated that the plain statement rule does not apply.\(^{308}\) The Second Circuit’s opinion in Muntaqim also adopted the “‘super-strong clear statement rule’” advanced in Gregory.\(^{309}\) The opinion concluded that the court would only reach the constitutional question of whether Congress has the power to strike down felon disenfranchisement statutes in situations that are beyond the power directly granted in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments if

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303. See Baker, 85 F.3d at 931.
304. Id. at 931-32 (quoting Gregory, 501 U.S. at 470).
305. Id. at 932 (quoting Gregory, 501 U.S. at 479 (White, J., concurring in part, dissenting in part, and concurring in the judgment)).
306. Id. at 931-32.
307. Id. at 932.
308. Id. at 932 n.13 (quoting Chisom v. Roemer, 501 U.S. 380, 411-12 (1991) (Scalia, J., dissenting)).
309. Muntaqim v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102, 115 (2d Cir.) (citing William N. Eskridge, Jr. & Philip P. Frickey, Foreword: Law as Equilibrium, 108 Harv. L. Rev. 26, 82 (1994), cert. denied, 125 S. Ct. 480 (2004) (mem.), reh’g en banc granted, No. 01-7260, 2004 WL 2998551 (2d Cir. Dec. 29, 2004). This rule, the court noted, has particular effect in areas of law that were “‘traditionally sensitive . . . such as legislation affecting the federal balance.’” Id. (quoting Gregory v. Ashcroft, 501 U.S. 452, 461 (1991)). This rule is also “closely related, but not identical, to the general constitutional avoidance canon,” which requires the court to avoid addressing rules that create constitutional conflict unless the proposed construction is clearly contrary to the legislative intent of Congress. Id. at 115 n.15.
Congress made a clear statement of its intent to do so.310 “Because we find that Congress did not make an unmistakably clear statement that § 1973 applies to state felon disenfranchisement statutes, we will not apply § 1973 to § 5-106,” the Muntaqim opinion concluded.311

The omission of the clear statement rule in Chisom was similarly unpersuasive to the Muntaqim court.312 The New York felon disenfranchisement provision under review in Muntaqim, the opinion noted, unlike the voting practice reviewed in Chisom, enjoys special authorization in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, and therefore is reviewed with a lower level of scrutiny and demands application of the clear statement rule.313

The emphatic dissenting opinion in Johnson took the same approach as the prevailing opinions in Baker and Muntaqim, fundamentally disagreeing with the majority’s assertion that the VRA can be applied in any form to felon disenfranchisement statutes.314 The dissent agreed that allowing the VRA to be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes violates the “long-standing rule of statutory interpretation that federal courts should not construe a statute to create a constitutional question unless there is a clear statement from Congress endorsing this understanding.”315

When the scope of a congressional act presents “grave constitutional questions,” the dissenting Johnson opinion argued, the court must determine whether the interpretation of the questioned congressional action is in line with congressional intent.316 Instead of Congress sanctioning the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes, the opinion continued, the “legislative history indicates just the opposite—that Congress did not intend the Voting Rights Act to apply to felon disenfranchisement provisions.”317

310. Id. at 116.
311. Id. at 129. The opinion determined that under either the Catholic Bishop or the Gregory formulation of the clear statement rule, the case failed, because the legislative record revealed “ample evidence” that Congress did not intend for the revised version of section 2 of the VRA to apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes. Id. at 127.
312. Id. at 128-29.
313. See id. at 129.
314. Johnson v. Governor of Fla., 353 F.3d 1287, 1314 (11th Cir. 2003) (Kravitch, J., dissenting), reh’g en banc granted, opinion vacated by 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004).
315. Id. at 1315.
316. Id.
317. Id. at 1316. The dissenting opinion argued its point by referring only to the portion of the VRA’s Senate report that addresses felon disenfranchisement statutes, the portion discussing section 4, not section 2. Id.; see S. Rep. No. 89-162 (1965), reprinted in 1965 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2508, 2561-62. The congressional record’s silence on application of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes, the dissent urged, indicates that section 2 of the Act was not intended to be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes. See Johnson, 353 F.3d at 1317-18 (Kravitch, J., dissenting).
The dissenting opinion in *Johnson* also argued that the 1982 amendment did not affect the VRA’s applicability to felon disenfranchisement statutes.318 The opinion declared that because the congressional record for the amendment did not “plainly” indicate intent to extend the Act’s coverage to incorporate felon disenfranchisement statutes, it did not.319 “Although it is conceivable that certain legislators may have wanted the Voting Rights Act to encompass felon disenfranchisement provisions,” the opinion argued, “we should not assume that Congress intended to produce a statute contrary to the plain text of the Fourteenth Amendment without a clear statement.”320 The opinion also criticized the *Farrakhan* court, which permitted the VRA challenge to Washington’s felon disenfranchisement scheme to proceed, for failing to speak directly to the constitutionality of its conclusions and failing to address whether there needs to be a clear statement from Congress that it intended for section 2 of the VRA to be applied in state felon disenfranchisement statutes before such challenges can proceed.321

**b. Congruence and Proportionality of the VRA Questioned**

The *Muntaqim* opinion also disputed that the results test of the VRA should apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes from a different but related angle. Section 2 of the VRA, as applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, is not sufficiently tailored, the opinion argued.322 As a result of the recent developments in Supreme Court jurisprudence, the opinion asserted, congressional legislation must have congruence and proportionality between the injury prevented and the means adopted in order to be constitutional.323 Congress must also expose a pattern of unconstitutional racial discrimination in order for legislation passed pursuant to Congress’s enforcement powers under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to pass muster, the opinion argued.324

The *Muntaqim* opinion was careful to note that despite the recent developments in Supreme Court jurisprudence regarding Congress’s

318. *Johnson*, 353 F.3d at 1317 (Kravitch, J., dissenting).
319. *Id.* at 1317-18.
320. *Id.* at 1318. The *Johnson* dissenting opinion also highlighted the fact that two congressional bills that acknowledge the practice of felon disenfranchisement were circulated that seemed to contradict the majority’s opinion, since it was “unclear why these bills have been proposed if Congress has the clear understanding that the Voting Rights Act currently covers these cases.” *Id.* at 1318 n.15.
321. *Id.* at 1316 n.11 (emphasizing that *Farrakhan v. Washington* is merely persuasive authority, and is not binding precedent).
323. *Id.* at 120-21.
324. *Id.* at 120, 124.
enforcement powers, the VRA has generally been deemed both proportional and congruent by the Supreme Court and numerous circuit courts, as there is a “vast and undisputed” congressional record of racially invidious voting practices.\footnote{Id. at 121.} Therefore, the question, according to the \textit{Muntaqim} opinion, is not the constitutionality of the VRA, but “whether Congress would exceed its authority if § 1973 were applied to state felon disenfranchisement statutes.”\footnote{Id.} While section 2 of the VRA is both congruent and proportional in its standard application, it is not so when applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, the opinion concluded.\footnote{Id. at 125.}

The link between the injury to be prevented by Congress—namely, the use of various dilution schemes by certain states to avoid the strictures of the VRA—and Congress’s supposed remedy—namely, the prohibition of \textit{any} felon disenfranchisement law enacted at \textit{any} time in \textit{any} state that “results” in the abridgement of the right to vote on account of race—is too attenuated.\footnote{Id. at 126.}

Further, the opinion argued, the congruence and proportionality requirement demands that Congress present a specific legislative record of intentional discrimination driving the enactment of felon disenfranchisement laws in order for the VRA to apply to them.\footnote{Id.} Because Congress has not done so or mentioned that such a record exists in the legislative history of the 1982 amendment to section 2 of the VRA, the opinion concluded, the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes is not congruent and proportional.\footnote{Id.}

The dissenting opinion in the decision to deny a rehearing en banc in \textit{Farrakhan} also argued that federal legislation must be congruent and proportional to the injury sought to be prevented, and is not so when applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes.\footnote{Farrakhan v. Washington, 359 F.3d 1116, 1122 (9th Cir. 2004) (Kozinski, J., dissenting) (citing City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507, 520 (1997)). With regard to section 5 of the VRA, the opinion argued, the Supreme Court has required enforcement legislation to have a specific record of constitutional violations. Id. A section 2 violation, it continued, should be supported by the same finding, and a “theoretical, undocumented threat of unconstitutional felon disenfranchisement laws simply doesn’t justify such a broad remedy.” Id. at 1123.} The opinion argued:

It is unlikely that Congress could have reached felon disenfranchisement even if it wanted to, at least not without a substantial evidentiary record and a more tailored remedy. In interpreting the VRA to reach felon disenfranchisement in a state without a history of race discrimination like Washington, the
Avoiding constitutional conflicts and recognizing the limits on Congress in the legislation it can pass, the dissenting opinion argued, is one of the roles of the court.

B. Opinions Permitting the Application of Section 2 of the VRA in Felon Disenfranchisement Statute Challenges

The non-prevailing opinion in 

Baker,

and the majority opinion in 

Johnson

disagreed with the reasoning in the opinions described above. In concluding that section 2 of the VRA can be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, these opinions stressed the importance of the mandates of equal protection and preventing racially discriminatory voting practices under the Fifteenth Amendment, and argued that the balance of power between the states and Congress had previously been shifted by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Therefore, these opinions argued, the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes does not alter this balance further. These opinions also advanced the idea that because racial discrimination causes the disproportionate conviction of minorities, there is, in turn, an impermissibly racially disparate impact on voting rights. Finally, these opinions rejected the contention that the clear statement rule applies to the VRA and were therefore not compelled to address the legislative intent of the VRA, since such an inquiry is contingent on finding that the clear statement rule applies.

1. Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment Cannot Overcome the Demands of Equal Protection

Both the non-prevailing opinion in 

Baker

and the Eleventh Circuit’s opinion in 

Johnson

viewed the amended section 2 of the VRA as a new and improved tool for tackling racially discriminatory felon disenfranchisement laws—a tool that still seeks to weed out invidious discrimination in felon disenfranchisement but requires only a demonstration of discriminatory impact. The forceful non-prevailing opinion in 

Baker

conceded that felon disenfranchisement is constitutionally authorized by Section 2 of the Fourteenth


332. Id. at 1124. The Supreme Court has rejected interpretations of the VRA in other cases that threatened the Act’s constitutionality. Id.
333. Id. at 1125.
334. The term “non-prevailing opinion” refers to the second 

Baker

Amendment pursuant to *Richardson v. Ramirez*, but argued that this fact does not give states “the right to disenfranchise felons on the basis of race.” The opinion argued that *Hunter v. Underwood*, rather than *Richardson*, set forth a definitive rule regarding whether Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment enjoys a special exemption from the Equal Protection Clause. The *Hunter* court, the opinion indicated, stated: “[W]e are confident that § 2 [of the Fourteenth Amendment] was not designed to permit the purposeful racial discrimination attending the enactment and operation of [the Alabama felon disenfranchisement provision] which otherwise violates § 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Nothing in our opinion in *Richardson v. Ramirez* . . . suggests the contrary.” This statement was dispositive for the non-prevailing opinion in *Baker*. Purposeful discrimination need not be proven through a showing of intent, the opinion argued, and can adequately be demonstrated by a showing of discriminatory results under the VRA.

The majority opinion in *Johnson* took a similar approach and emphasized that “[t]he proper question here is whether felon status interacts with social and historical conditions to cause an inequality in the opportunities enjoyed by black and white voters to elect their preferred representatives.” The opinion also criticized the district court for failing to examine the totality of the circumstances as demanded by section 2 of the VRA and relying solely on the fact that the plaintiffs were criminally convicted in granting the defendant summary judgment.

The *Johnson* opinion briefly refuted the allegations made by the dissent that its decision creates serious constitutional problems by permitting the VRA to subjugate Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. “[S]tates clearly do not have the right to intentionally

335. *Id.* at 937.
336. *Id.* at 936 (quoting *Hunter v. Underwood*, 471 U.S. 222, 233 (1985)).
337. *Id.* (quoting *Hunter*, 471 U.S. at 233).
338. *Id.* at 937.
339. *Johnson v. Governor of Fla.*, 353 F.3d 1287, 1305 (11th Cir. 2003) (internal quotations omitted), *reh’g en banc granted, opinion vacated by* 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004). To establish a violation of section 2, the district court opinion concluded that “there must be a nexus between the discriminatory exclusion of blacks from the political process and the disenfranchisement of felons” that was demanded in *Wesley v. Collins*, 605 F. Supp. 802, 813 (M.D. Tenn. 1985), *aff’d*, 791 F.2d 1255 (6th Cir. 1986). *Johnson v. Bush*, 214 F. Supp. 2d 1333, 1341 (S.D. Fla. 2002), *aff’d in part, rev’d in part and remanded sub nom. Johnson*, 353 F.3d at 1287. Bias within the criminal justice system is not enough to establish a vote denial claim, the district court opinion declared, and the fact that discrimination exists within the criminal justice system, but not the voting system, precludes it from application of the results test of section 2 of the VRA. *Id.* at 1342. The plaintiffs also argued that discriminatory intent was a substantial or motivating factor behind the enactment of the constitutional provision in question. *Id.* at 1338-42. This argument contributed to both the district and circuit courts’ decisions, but will not be discussed in depth in this Note.
340. *Johnson*, 353 F.3d at 1305.
disenfranchise felons on the basis of race,” the opinion argued. While congressional authority may not include simply banning all felon disenfranchisement statutes, the opinion admitted, “it may certainly exercise the power granted to it under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment to enforce statutorily the constitutional prohibition against racially discriminatory criminal disenfranchisement.” Permitting racially neutral felon disenfranchisement but prohibiting felon disenfranchisement with racially discriminatory results, the opinion emphasized, is “compatible” with the constitutional authorization of felon disenfranchisement and congressional enforcement powers under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Unlike the Second Circuit opinions in *Baker* and *Muntaqim*, and the Eleventh Circuit opinion in *Johnson*, the Ninth Circuit opinion in *Farrakhan* did not directly address the constitutional conflict between the authorization of felon disenfranchisement in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause. Rather, the opinion simply affirmed the district court’s determination that section 2 of the VRA can be applied in a felon disenfranchisement statute challenge. The Ninth Circuit’s decision to permit the state felon disenfranchisement statute challenge to proceed was grounded in the argument that “evidence of discrimination within the criminal justice system can be relevant to a Section 2 [of the VRA] analysis.” In reversing the district court’s decision to dismiss the claim, the opinion concluded that the district court erred in failing to consider how the felon disenfranchisement law “interacts with external factors such as ‘social and historical conditions’ to result in denial of the right to vote on account of race or color.”

341. Id. at 1306 n.27.
342. Id.
343. Id.
344. Farrakhan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009, 1016 (9th Cir. 2003). The district court in *Farrakhan v. Locke* rejected the argument that the “results test,” if applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, violates Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment: Viewed in isolation, it is constitutionally permissible to strip an individual of the right to vote based upon conviction for a felony. However, in spite of this facial validity, the Supreme Court has made clear [in *Hunter v. Underwood*] that the states cannot use felon disenfranchisement as a tool to discriminate on the basis of race….. It necessarily follows, then, that Congress also has the power to protect against discriminatory uses of felon disenfranchisement statutes through the VRA.
345. Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1012.
346. Id. (quoting Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 U.S. 30, 47 (1986)).
2. The Balance of State and Federal Power Was Previously Altered by the Civil War Amendments

The non-prevailing opinion in Baker addressed head on concerns that applying section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes alters the balance of power between the states and the federal government. The opinion argued that reliance on the Supreme Court case law advanced by the opposing opinion is misplaced, as the case law does not demonstrate “that felon disenfranchisement statutes that discriminate on the basis of race are beyond the reach of the Equal Protection Clause.” Ultimately, the non-prevailing opinion asserted, there is “no persuasive reason, in view of Hunter, why Congress may not use its enforcing power under § 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment and § 2 of the Fifteenth Amendment to bar racially discriminatory results, as it did in the Voting Rights Act.”

The opinion further asserted that the position advanced by the prevailing opinion in Baker, that the amended VRA still demanded a showing of racially discriminatory intent, simply overlooked the purpose of the 1982 amendment. The prevailing opinion’s approach would “drastically limit the scope of § 2 of the Voting Rights Act, prohibiting a § 2 claim by any minority citizen in the absence of an allegation that the particular discriminatory practice had been intentionally imposed in the past in the particular jurisdiction.”

Rather, the opinion argued, “Congress included past discrimination as only one of a list of factors to be considered in determining whether there has been a violation of § 2 under the totality of the circumstances test.”

That opinion also disputed the prevailing opinion’s implication that the “results test” requires a specific legislative record demonstrating that past racial discrimination drove the enactment of a state felon disenfranchisement statute in order for a VRA inquiry to be constitutionally permissible. The opinion noted that there is, in fact, such a history of using felon disenfranchisement statutes to purposefully discriminate on the basis of race, were one actually demanded:

Although there has been no record developed in this case, due largely to its premature dismissal sua sponte, there is evidence to

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347. Baker v. Pataki, 85 F.3d 919, 936-37 (2d Cir. 1996). Richardson v. Ramirez, the opinion asserted, did not give proper attention to Hunter v. Underwood, nor did Green v. Board of Elections, 380 F.2d 445 (2d Cir. 1967), cert. denied, 389 U.S. 1048 (1968), a case that did not involve an analogous claim of racial discrimination or implicate the VRA. Therefore, neither opinion was dispositive. Baker, 85 F.3d at 936-37.
349. Id.
350. Id. at 938.
351. Id.
suggest that felon disenfranchisement statutes often have been used to deny the right to vote on account of race. While felon disenfranchisement may be a widespread historical practice, disenfranchisement based on race is a historical practice that the Voting Rights Act seeks to eradicate.\textsuperscript{352}

The non-prevailing \textit{Baker} opinion also rejected the prevailing opinion’s assertion that there is sufficient ambiguity in the language of the VRA to require a clear statement from Congress that it intended section 2 of the VRA to be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes.\textsuperscript{353} Instead, the opinion argued, because the VRA did nothing to alter the constitutional balance between states and the federal government, previously established by the Civil War Amendments, there is no need to explore the use of the clear statement rule.\textsuperscript{354}

The non-prevailing opinion also argued that \textit{Chisom v. Roemer}, and not \textit{Gregory v. Ashcroft}, must guide any discussion of the application of the clear statement rule to section 2 of the VRA.\textsuperscript{355} \textit{Chisom}, the opinion pointed out, provided “clear Supreme Court authority that the plain statement rule does \textit{not} apply when determining coverage under §2 of the Voting Rights Act.”\textsuperscript{356} While the prevailing opinion in \textit{Baker} framed \textit{Chisom}’s silence on the clear statement rule as a mere oversight, the non-prevailing opinion relied instead on Scalia’s statement that “‘the possibility of applying that rule never crossed [the Court’s] mind,’”\textsuperscript{357} and that the “rule probably does not apply to Congressional exercises of authority under the Fourteenth Amendment.”\textsuperscript{358} The opinion asserted that \textit{Chisom}, and not \textit{Gregory}, is more analogous to \textit{Baker}, as it analyzed the same section of the VRA and involved a similar level of intrusion on state authority.\textsuperscript{359} \textit{Gregory}, the opinion argued, not only dealt with a different type of legislation, passed under the Commerce Clause, but also demanded application of the clear statement rule only when a statute is ambiguous.\textsuperscript{360} Such ambiguity is not an issue in \textit{Baker}, the opinion asserted: “The Voting Rights Act does not seem to be ambiguous. ‘Any citizen’ usually means any citizen, and I submit that it does so in the Voting Rights Act.”\textsuperscript{361}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{352} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{353} Id. at 940.
\item \textsuperscript{354} Id. at 938.
\item \textsuperscript{355} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{356} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{357} Id. at 938-39 (quoting Chisom v. Roemer, 501 U.S. 380, 412 (1991)).
\item \textsuperscript{358} Id. at 939.
\item \textsuperscript{359} Id. at 938-39.
\item \textsuperscript{360} Id. at 939.
\item \textsuperscript{361} Id. The opinion also found that the State’s argument that the VRA’s ambiguity is evident from the legislative history of section 4 of the Act, the section that sets forth the definition for “tests and devices,” must fail. Id.; see 42 U.S.C. § 1973b(c) (2000). The opinion instead concluded that section 4 had “different
A third Baker opinion concurred with this non-prevailing approach, and sought to clarify the exact point of dispute between the prevailing and non-prevailing opinions in the case. This third opinion found the dispute to be “whether Congressional power to enforce by a ‘result’ test the constitutional ban against voting discrimination based on race may validly reach a voting discrimination among felons.”

While [the Judge writing for the prevailing group of five judges] requires a clear statement of Congressional intent because the Supreme Court in other contexts has required such a statement. . . . [the Judge writing for the non-prevailing group of judges argues] the Supreme Court has already decided that section 2 of the Voting Rights Act is not subject to the plain statement rule.

This third opinion supported the approach of the non-prevailing opinion, pointing out that “[s]ince Gregory construed [legislation that is not the Voting Rights Act] it is not readily apparent why . . . Gregory is any aid to an understanding of whether the plain statement rule applies to section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.” This opinion went a step further, explicitly linking the inapplicability of the clear statement rule in the context of section 2 of the VRA to the fact that the Civil War Amendments had already changed the balance of state/federal power.

The district court in Farrakhan v. Locke also rejected the contention that the clear statement rule applies to section 2 of the VRA. Agreeing that the Civil War Amendments already changed the state/federal balance of power in the area of racially discriminatory voter requirements, the opinion determined that “Congress has the power to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments through the VRA, ‘despite the burdens those measures placed on the states.’” The Ninth Circuit opinion in Farrakhan, however, did not address the clear statement rule at all. “Although states may deprive felons of the right to vote without violating the Fourteenth Amendment,” the Ninth Circuit opinion instead emphasized, “when felon disenfranchisement results in denial of the right to vote or vote

purposes, scope and language” than section 2 and therefore could not be relied on to create ambiguity in the language of section 2. Baker, 85 F.3d at 939.


363. Id.

364. Id. at 942 (citations omitted).

365. Id. at 942 n.2.

366. Id. at 942. The opinion agreed with the prevailing opinion’s statement that the Commerce Clause, which was under specific consideration in Gregory, would not receive immunity from the clear statement rule. Id. at 942-43.


368. Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1009.
dilution on account of race or color, Section 2 affords disenfranchised felons the means to seek redress.\textsuperscript{369}

Instead of searching for a specific legislative intent demanded by clear statement rule analysis, the Ninth Circuit’s opinion argued that the factors listed in the Senate report accompanying the 1982 Amendment, along with additional factors, should be used to evaluate a challenged voting practice with a “practical perspective.”\textsuperscript{370} While Congress did not list the criminal justice system’s racially discriminatory practices as a specific factor in the report, the opinion reasoned, this omission does not indicate that it should be excluded from analysis under section 2.\textsuperscript{371}

The \textit{Farrakhan} opinion also argued that the workings of the criminal justice system, to the extent that they contribute to the conviction of minorities at disproportionate rates, “would clearly hinder the ability of racial minorities to participate effectively in the political process, as disenfranchisement is automatic . . . rendering it simply another relevant social and historical condition to be considered where appropriate.”\textsuperscript{372} The \textit{Farrakhan} court ultimately remanded the case to the district court to conduct the proper evidentiary inquiry into evidence of racial bias in the state’s criminal justice system.\textsuperscript{373}

The recently vacated Eleventh Circuit opinion in \textit{Johnson}, like the non-prevailing opinion in \textit{Baker} and the Ninth Circuit opinion in \textit{Farrakhan}, disagreed that the clear statement rule applies to section 2 of the VRA.\textsuperscript{374} The opinion rebutted the dissenting opinion’s argument that the congressional record indicated that Congress intended to exempt felon disenfranchisement statutes from VRA coverage.\textsuperscript{375} The majority opinion in \textit{Johnson} also criticized the dissent’s examination of the legislative history of section 4 of the VRA, declaring that such an examination was not dispositive in discussions of the intent underlying section 2.\textsuperscript{376}

It is perfectly conceivable that Congress might wish to exclude a particular practice from section 4’s “test or device” label to avoid attaching to it the additional requirements, yet still intend to

\textsuperscript{369} \textit{Id.} at 1016.
\textsuperscript{370} \textit{Id.} at 1019.
\textsuperscript{371} \textit{Id.} at 1020. The court indicated that this factor could be considered under factor (5) in the report which directs courts to consider discrimination in areas such as “education, employment, and health.” \textit{Id.} (quoting S. Rep. No. 97-417, at 29 (1982), reprinted in \textit{1982 U.S.C.C.A.N.} 177, 206).
\textsuperscript{372} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{373} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{374} \textit{Johnson v. Governor of Fla.}, 353 F.3d 1287 (11th Cir. 2003), \textit{reh’g en banc} granted, \textit{opinion vacated by} 377 F.3d 1163 (11th Cir. 2004).
\textsuperscript{375} \textit{Id.} at 1306 n.27.
\textsuperscript{376} \textit{Id.}
prohibit that practice when the evidence shows that its use results in the denial of the right to vote on account of race.377

III. COURTS MUST ALLOW SECTION 2 OF THE VRA CHALLENGES TO FELON DISENFRANCHISEMENT STATUTES TO PROCEED

It is clear from the opinions in Baker, Muntaqim, Farrakhan, and Johnson that the circuits are divided by very different interpretations of the importance of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment when viewed in light of the Equal Protection Clause.378 The circuits also disagree about the scope of Congress’s enforcement powers under the Civil War Amendments, the current balance of state and federal power in the area of voter requirements, whether the clear statement rule applies to the amended version of section 2 of the VRA, and what the legislative history of the enactment and 1982 amendment of the VRA reveal about its applicability to felon disenfranchisement statutes.379 It is also clear from the numerous majority and dissenting opinions in these cases that the circuits are also internally divided in their reasoning. Without Supreme Court intervention, these opposing approaches will continue to be applied in the different circuits, and the racially disparate impact of felon disenfranchisement will continue unchallenged in the circuits that do not permit application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes.380 These racially disparate impacts of felon disenfranchisement are intolerable.

When the Supreme Court denied certiorari in Farrakhan and Muntaqim, it declined to resolve the fundamental, seemingly irreconcilable disagreements between and within the circuits.381 When that resolution does ultimately come, the Supreme Court must adopt the approach of the Ninth Circuit and permit the amended version of section 2 of the VRA to be applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes.382 The Court must also declare the constitutionality of the “results test” of section 2 as applied to felon disenfranchisement laws, conclude that the application of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes does not alter the existing balance of state/federal power (thereby negating the need to apply the clear statement rule), and emphasize the important public policy considerations that will be met by allowing VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement to proceed. By doing so, the Court will recognize that the disparate racial impacts of felon disenfranchisement are an unacceptable infringement on the fundamental right to vote.

377. Id.
378. See supra Parts II.A.1, II.B.1.
379. See supra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.
380. See supra notes 13-14 and accompanying text.
381. See supra notes 13-14 and accompanying text.
382. See supra Part II.B.
This part argues first that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment must not prevent section 2 of the VRA from being applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes; second, that applying the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes does nothing to alter the state/federal balance of power because the Civil Rights Amendments previously altered this balance; and third, that meaningful application of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes is critical to realizing the mandates of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

A. Relieving Constitutional Tension

The circuit courts generally do not dispute the fact that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment permits states to disenfranchise felons. The traditionally untouchable position that this provision has been afforded, however, is out of step with modern readings of the Civil War Amendments. These Amendments, despite the universal acknowledgement that they have altered the path of the country’s history of racial discrimination, still are not given validity in the prevailing Baker opinion and in the Muntaqim opinion. The Second Circuit failed to recognize that felon disenfranchisement does not merit any special protections.

Opinions that relied heavily on Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment in denying the use of the VRA in felon disenfranchisement statute challenges failed to examine this provision within the specific context of racially discriminatory voting practices. Richardson v. Ramirez, which held that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment is key to analyzing felon disenfranchisement laws under the equal protection doctrine, did not address the applicability of that provision in the context of Congress’s enforcement powers to prohibit racially discriminatory voting practices, and racially discriminatory felon disenfranchisement laws in particular. Because Richardson did not address the racially disparate impacts of felon disenfranchisement, its majority opinion should not be viewed as dispositive. Rather, Hunter v. Underwood is the case that must guide this discussion. The Hunter court recognized that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment’s mention of felon disenfranchisement is not enough to overcome racially discriminatory felon disenfranchisement statutes. That is, it recognized that racial discrimination in a felon disenfranchisement law is an impermissible violation of the Equal Protection Clause.

383. See supra Parts II.A.1, II.B.1.
384. See supra Part II.B.1.
385. See supra Part II.B.2.
386. See supra Part II.A.1; notes 129-40 and accompanying text.
387. See supra notes 141-50 and accompanying text.
388. See supra notes 141-50 and accompanying text.
The Supreme Court, or any other federal court addressing this issue, must reconsider the approach of Justice Marshall in his strong dissent in *Richardson v. Ramirez.*\(^{389}\) Justice Marshall’s argument that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment should not be given a protected place in equal protection jurisprudence and should be subjected to the same scrutiny as other voting rights restrictions warrants a second look.\(^{390}\) His approach is attractive for two reasons. First, it does not render Fourteenth Amendment jurisprudence static, and would allow the equal protection doctrine to grow, change, and apply more effectively in an evolving world. Second, his approach prevents language in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment that was arguably not formulated for the express purpose of upholding felon disenfranchisement to have such an effect.\(^{391}\) Rather, Justice Marshall recognized that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was merely part of a political struggle between southern and northern legislators, and the purpose of the provision was to create a compromise between these factions.\(^{392}\) The focus of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, therefore, was not felon disenfranchisement.\(^{393}\) By adhering to Justice Marshall’s approach, the Supreme Court and other federal courts could give Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment only the weight that it deserves and properly realign the equal protection analysis courts apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes with that of other voting restrictions.

The Supreme Court should continue on the path it forged in *Hunter v. Underwood* and hold that the application of section 2 of the VRA is not limited by Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment.\(^{394}\) Racial discrimination in felon disenfranchisement statutes, be it intentional or de facto, is impermissible and remedies for this wrong should not be limited by the “other crime” provision of the Fourteenth Amendment. To allow this provision to limit the effects of the other sections of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Fifteenth Amendment would be to elevate one constitutional provision over others. This is not called for. As the Supreme Court has previously noted, constitutional concepts of equal protection are not “confined to historic notions of equality,” and the Constitution can be interpreted and re-interpreted as the meaning of democracy changes and progresses.\(^{395}\)

\(^{389}\) See *supra* notes 133-37 and accompanying text.

\(^{390}\) See *supra* notes 133-37 and accompanying text; see also *Fletcher,* *supra* note 44, at 1906 (arguing that courts must not overlook the historical context of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment).

\(^{391}\) See *supra* notes 133-37 and accompanying text.

\(^{392}\) See *supra* note 136 and accompanying text.

\(^{393}\) See *supra* note 136 and accompanying text.

\(^{394}\) See *supra* notes 141-46 and accompanying text.

The Second Circuit opinions in *Baker* and *Muntaqim*, arguing that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment cannot be trumped by the Equal Protection Clause, propose an unsettling solution: that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment be permitted to trump the Equal Protection Clause instead.\footnote{\textit{See supra} Part II.A.1.} This solution to the constitutional conflict inherent in the Fourteenth Amendment fails to consider not only the history of the Fourteenth Amendment, but also the public policies underlying the ratification of, and subsequent application of, the Equal Protection Clause by the courts. Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment, a provision of secondary importance in our country’s jurisprudence, must not be elevated to a position of artificial importance.\footnote{\textit{See supra} Part II.B.1.} Instead, in this zero-sum game where two constitutional provisions conflict, the provisions that prevail should be those that ensure equality, protect fundamental rights, and have held a continuous and important position in our legal history. Therefore, it is improper to allow Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment to be elevated above the Equal Protection Clause, which possesses these qualities.

The Supreme Court and the other federal courts must also recognize that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment was given little attention until Justice Rehnquist picked it out of oblivion in his *Richardson* opinion, one that has been the target of scholarly backlash.\footnote{\textit{See supra} note 203 and accompanying text; \textit{see also} Tribe, \textit{supra} note 202, at 1094; Shapiro, \textit{supra} note 202, at 302, 304.} One cannot help but question why this section of the amendment was not interpreted to grant the power to sustain felon disenfranchisement laws nationwide until the *Richardson* opinion.\footnote{\textit{See supra} note 203 and accompanying text.} The courts should also consider the argument that the Fifteenth Amendment effectively repealed Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment.\footnote{\textit{See Chin, supra} note 25, at 316 (advancing this argument).} While neither of these inquiries gained significant traction in the *Baker*, *Farrakhan*, *Johnson*, and *Muntaqim* decisions, they may prove useful to plaintiffs in future cases.

**B. Unraveling the Balance of Power**

Scholarly criticism of felon disenfranchisement to date has focused primarily on the effects of felon disenfranchisement and the sociopolitical factors that indicate that the practice must end.\footnote{\textit{See supra} notes 48-73 and accompanying text.} Few have addressed the federalism conflicts that emerged in the *Baker*, *Farrakhan*, *Johnson*, and *Muntaqim* opinions examined in Part II.\footnote{\textit{See supra} Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.} It is necessary to begin addressing these issues head on.
In leaving both the Farrakhan and Muntaqim decisions intact, the Supreme Court left two competing readings of the balance of state and federal power standing. The federal district and circuit courts, until provided with a definitive Supreme Court resolution to the issue, must universally recognize that the Civil War Amendments significantly and permanently shifted the balance of power between the states and the federal government. The Supreme Court must also adhere to this rationale, as it is supported by its previous jurisprudence.

Moreover, the federal courts must acknowledge that the constitutional grant of power to states to establish voter qualifications is not boundless. Rather, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments have severely limited the ability of states to enact voter qualifications that impermissibly infringe on the fundamental right to vote. Since the late 1800s, Congress has protected the fundamental right to vote, even though doing so has often limited state power. The VRA, legislation that has repeatedly been declared congruent and proportional, must therefore be permitted to apply to the states in full force in order to prevent impermissible infringements on the right to vote. The time has come to subject felon disenfranchisement laws to the same scrutiny as other state laws that limit the fundamental right to vote and recognize that doing so falls within the balance of state and federal power that has existed since the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were ratified.

The plain language of the VRA is unambiguous. Section 2 of the VRA clearly applies to “any citizen.” No qualification can be found that indicates that it does not apply to any citizen convicted of a crime. Because the language of section 2 of the VRA is clear and unambiguous, there is simply no need to apply the clear statement rule or examine congressional intent behind the VRA. The most recent formulations of the clear statement rule of statutory

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403. See supra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.
406. See supra notes 26-28 and accompanying text.
407. See supra Parts I.C.1, II.B.2.
408. See supra Part I.C.
409. See supra Parts I.C.2., II.A.2.b; note 239 and accompanying text.
410. See supra notes 360-61 and accompanying text.
411. See supra notes 360-61 and accompanying text.
construction indicate that it only applies when the statute under review is ambiguous.412

Ultimately, the conflict regarding the application of the clear statement rule boils down to the conflict between the Supreme Court’s decisions in Gregory v. Ashcroft and Chisom v. Roemer.413 The Court must adhere to its own decision in Chisom, as it remains the only case to date that provided an opportunity for the clear statement rule to be applied to section 2 of the VRA.414 Chisom cannot be dismissed as an anomaly in failing to apply the clear statement rule.415 Chisom undoubtedly stands for the proposition that the clear statement rule does not apply to all legislation passed pursuant to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, despite the Court’s conclusions in Gregory.416 Accordingly, Gregory, despite the Second Circuit’s contention to the contrary, is not controlling precedent in determining whether the clear statement rule applies to the VRA.417 The Supreme Court must clarify that Chisom, and not Gregory, guides the application of the clear statement rule to section 2 of the VRA to resolve the existing confusion.

Even if it were assumed arguendo that the plain language of the VRA is ambiguous and the clear statement rule therefore applies, an examination of the legislative history of the Act would not reveal that Congress would exceed its enforcement powers if the VRA was applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes. Instead, an examination of the Senate report for the 1982 amendment reveals silence from Congress on whether felon disenfranchisement statutes were intended to be exempted from section 2 of the Act.418 This silence cannot be interpreted to indicate that the VRA was not intended to apply to felon disenfranchisement statutes. Instead, this silence only signals that Congress did not state its position on the application of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes. In order for legislation to be adequately flexible, Congress must not exhaustively list every potential application of every law. Such an approach would make the law rigid and nonresponsive.

The VRA is also congruent and proportional legislation.419 The Supreme Court has held this to be the case on numerous occasions.420 Those opinions arguing that the Act, if applied to felon disenfranchisement statutes, is not congruent and proportional lack

412. See supra notes 219, 229-31 and accompanying text.
413. See supra Part II.A.2; notes 222-33 and accompanying text.
414. See supra notes 222-25, 355-61 and accompanying text.
415. See supra notes 307-08, 312-13 and accompanying text.
416. See supra notes 219-25 and accompanying text.
417. See supra Part II.A.2.a.
418. But see supra notes 318-20 and accompanying text.
419. See supra Parts II.A.2, II.B.2.
420. See supra note 325 and accompanying text.
supporting case law. These opinions attempted to rely instead on the lack of a discrete congressional record on racial discrimination driving the enactment of felon disenfranchisement laws. Nationally, there is a substantial record of the country’s history of racial discrimination driving the enactment of felon disenfranchisement statutes. The fact that this record is not compiled into a single congressional record does not indicate that it is not available for analysis. The Supreme Court has already declared that the VRA has a fully developed and adequate congressional record to be generally congruent and proportional legislation under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. This is sufficient, as a demand for a specific congressional record for felon disenfranchisement finds no significant support in the case law.

The amendment of the VRA in 1982 is also congruent with the power shift between the states and federal government that occurred with ratification of the Civil War Amendments. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, with their accompanying demand for a showing of discriminatory intent to successfully challenge a voting restriction, did not provide enough federal protection. The difficulty of proving that racial discrimination motivated the enactment of legislation such as felon disenfranchisement laws is precisely the reason that the VRA was amended in 1982 to adopt a results test. This amendment in no way altered the congruence and proportionality of the VRA, and the Supreme Court must definitively rule that section 2 of the Act still meets this test. To rule any other way would be to afford undeserved protection to the invidious racial discrimination that originally spurred the enactment and amendment of felon disenfranchisement laws following the Civil War simply because racially discriminatory intent is not usually provable.

By ruling that the application of the amended section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws does not exceed Congress’s enforcement powers under the Civil War Amendments, the Supreme Court would bolster the protections against racially discriminatory voting practices. The current impact of felon disenfranchisement statutes on racial minorities cannot be ignored, and indicates that the mandates of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments have yet to be met. Cases such as *Baker, Farrakhan, Johnson*, and *Muntaqim*

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421. See supra notes 322-33 and accompanying text.
422. See supra notes 329-30 and accompanying text.
423. See supra notes 96-100 and accompanying text.
424. See supra notes 238-39 and accompanying text.
425. See supra Part II.B.2; see also Chin, supra note 25, at 308-09 (noting that voter qualifications have been greatly federalized).
426. See supra notes 116-21 and accompanying text.
427. See supra notes 116-21 and accompanying text.
428. See supra Part I.C.
429. See supra notes 96-100, 116-21 and accompanying text.
provide an opportunity to better adhere to those mandates.\textsuperscript{430} Therefore, VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes must be permitted to proceed.

\textbf{C. Maintaining the Potency and Effectiveness of the VRA}

Allowing a totality of the circumstances analysis under section 2 of the VRA to proceed in the felon disenfranchisement context will allow for comprehensive, meaningful review.\textsuperscript{431} This analysis will bring to the surface racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. It will also permit for examination of all the factors that result in discriminatory voting practices without meeting the difficult—if not impossible—showing of discriminatory intent.\textsuperscript{432}

The work of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments is far from over. Even if some felon disenfranchisement laws were not enacted with discriminatory intent, the administration of the criminal justice system—with higher investigation, prosecution, and incarceration rates for African-Americans—creates an obvious discriminatory outcome.\textsuperscript{433} The “well-documented empirical findings” of the racially discriminatory impacts of the criminal justice system cannot be disregarded.\textsuperscript{434} Many studies have revealed that the disproportionate number of African-Americans in the criminal justice system cannot be adequately explained by mere propensity for criminal conduct.\textsuperscript{435}

The effects of felon disenfranchisement on minority populations cannot be taken lightly. Almost 150 years after the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, African-American voting strength continues to be diluted to a staggering extent by felon disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{436} Moreover, felon disenfranchisement has significantly impacted our electoral system in numerous ways, determined the outcome of elections,\textsuperscript{437} and continues to prevent ex-felons from reintegrating back into society.\textsuperscript{438} Felon disenfranchisement has, in truth, prevented the fundamental right to vote from being fully realized by the African-American community.

Congress abandoned the racially discriminatory intent test for the VRA in 1982 because such a standard is nearly impossible to meet.\textsuperscript{439} Courts have the duty to ensure that Congress’s decision to employ a results test is realized in enforcing this legislation. By employing an

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{430} See supra Part II.
  \item \textsuperscript{431} See supra Part II.B.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{432} See supra notes 116-21 and accompanying text.
  \item \textsuperscript{433} See supra notes 59-71 and accompanying text.
  \item \textsuperscript{434} See Keyssar, supra note 64, at 307.
  \item \textsuperscript{435} See Ewald, supra note 18, at 1125.
  \item \textsuperscript{436} See supra notes 59-71 and accompanying text.
  \item \textsuperscript{437} See supra note 52 and accompanying text.
  \item \textsuperscript{438} See supra note 56 and accompanying text.
  \item \textsuperscript{439} See supra notes 116-21 and accompanying text.
\end{itemize}
intricate, proper totality of the circumstances analysis under the VRA—an analysis that extensively examines the multifaceted racially discriminatory impact of felon disenfranchisement, and does not merely search for discriminatory intent—courts have the opportunity to meet the mandates of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in a meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

“Today, our political Constitution looks frail and incomplete in the face of modern universal suffrage principles visible all over the world.”440 In order to overcome the current harm caused by felon disenfranchisement, the United States Supreme Court and other federal courts must take drastic steps to affirm the fundamental right to vote. Felon disenfranchisement offends our most basic notions of the democratic ideal of voting. That offense deepens when considered in conjunction with the disparate racial impact of the practice. The VRA finally offers a potent tool for overcoming these statutes. Those fighting to end felon disenfranchisement must press for Supreme Court review of cases such as Baker v. Pataki, Muntaqim v. Coombe, Johnson v. Governor of Florida, and Farrakhan v. Washington, and continue litigating the issue.

The most invidious types of discrimination in the realm of voting must be weeded out with tools that go beyond the traditional scope of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The Civil War Amendments alone were unable to halt subtle racially discriminatory legislation. Instead, Congress and the courts must tackle the most latent forms of racism in our voting system with tools that are more probing. Application of section 2 of the VRA to felon disenfranchisement statutes presents that opportunity.