Let's Not Jump to Conclusions: Approaching Felon Disenfranchisement Challenges Under the Voting Rights Act

Thomas G. Varnum
Rountree, Losee & Baldwin L.L.P.

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl

Part of the Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons, Election Law Commons, Jurisprudence Commons, Law and Race Commons, Legislation Commons, and the State and Local Government Law Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl/vol14/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Journal of Race and Law by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.
LET'S NOT JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS: APPROACHING FELON DISENFRANCHISEMENT CHALLENGES UNDER THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

Thomas G. Varnum*

Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 invalidates voting qualifications that deny the right to vote on account of race or color. This Article confronts a split among the federal appellate courts concerning whether felons may rely on Section 2 when challenging felon disenfranchisement laws. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals allows felony disenfranchisement challenges under Section 2; however, the Second and Eleventh Circuits foresee unconstitutional consequences and thus do not. After discussing the background of voting rights jurisprudence, history of felon disenfranchisement laws, and evolution of Section 2, this Article identifies the points of contention among the disagreeing courts.

The crux of this Article is that both sides of the debate have erred. Both sides wrongly assume that the consequences of accepting these vote denial challenges are predictable. However, because a standard approach to vote denial challenges under Section 2 does not currently exist, no court can foresee the results of allowing such challenges to felony disenfranchisement laws. Therefore, predicting the constitutional implications of accepting these challenges without first identifying an appropriate analysis is impossible.

This Article concludes by proposing an analysis for consideration. The proposed approach is a tailored version of sliding scale scrutiny—an analysis that the United States Supreme Court, following Burdick v. Takushi, now applies to constitutional voting rights claims. Using this adapted approach, the Supreme Court can resolve the current split in authority and find that Section 2 is a viable vehicle for challenging racially-discriminatory felony disenfranchisement laws.

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 110
I. BACKGROUND ................................................................................................................. 112
   A. The Right to Vote .......................................................................................................... 112
   B. Burdick v. Takushi ......................................................................................................... 114
   C. Felon Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States .................................................. 116
      1. The Impact of Felon Disenfranchisement Laws......................................................... 117
      2. Richardson v. Ramirez ................................................................................................. 118

* Attorney at Law, Rountree, Losee & Baldwin, L.L.P. (Wilmington, North Carolina); J.D. U.C. Davis School of Law (King Hall); B.A. with Honors, Sociology and Management in Society, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This Article benefited immensely from Professor Christopher Elmendorf's incredible knowledge, creativity, and encouragement. For both supporting me and putting up with me, I owe everything to my remarkable wife and amazing parents.
Federal courts are jumping to conclusions about the constitutionality of allowing felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 of the Voting Rights Act ("VRA"). In the midst of their leaps, these courts have skipped over a crucial analytical step, leading to potential misapplications of the VRA. Because of their flawed analyses, some federal courts may silently be condoning infringements of certain citizens' right to vote—precisely the harm the VRA seeks to prevent.¹

Through section 2 of the VRA, Congress granted courts the power to strike down laws that disproportionately burden minorities’ voting rights.\(^2\) Presently, however, federal courts disagree about whether felons may challenge state felon disenfranchisement statutes under that section. The current split of authority threatens to prevent challenges to statutes that disenfranchise felons, even though such statutes often have disproportionate effects on minorities.\(^3\) The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals allows challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes under section 2.\(^4\) The Second Circuit Court of Appeals, however, prohibits challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes under section 2 because of concerns that allowing such challenges violates constitutional provisions.\(^5\)

Importantly, an analytical flaw exists within these federal courts’ decisions. Both courts have ignored an important question in their analyses: how would courts approach section 2 challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws? Instead, these courts simply presume an ability to foresee the juridical effects and constitutional implications of allowing these challenges.

This Article addresses and responds to the courts’ flawed reasoning. Specifically, this Article asserts that a uniform approach to section 2 challenges must exist before courts can determine the constitutionality of allowing section 2 challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws.\(^6\) Currently, however, there is no uniform approach.\(^7\) This Article responds to the flawed reasoning by proposing a workable approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2.

Part I discusses the emergence of voting protections, the history of felon disenfranchisement laws, and the evolution of section 2 of the VRA.

---

2. 42 U.S.C. § 1973 (2007); see discussion infra Part I.D. Congress and federal courts reject voting regulations that disproportionately burden minority voting rights in other contexts as well. See generally U.S. CONST. amend. XXIV (prohibiting poll taxes); U.S. CONST. amend. XV (prohibiting states from denying right to vote on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude); Hunter v. Underwood, 471 U.S. 222, 233 (1985) (striking Alabama felon disenfranchisement law because of invidious legislative intent); Guinn v. United States, 238 U.S. 347 (1915) (striking Oklahoma grandfather clause that exempted most whites from literacy test).

3. Compare Farrakhan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009 (9th Cir. 2003) (allowing felon disenfranchisement challenge under section 2), and Wesley v. Collins, 791 F.2d 1255 (6th Cir. 1986) (holding, implicitly, that challenge is sustainable by applying section 2 analysis to challenged felon disenfranchisement law), with Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305 (2d Cir. 2006) (precluding felon disenfranchisement law because of invidious legislative intent); Guinn v. United States, 238 U.S. 347 (1915) (striking Oklahoma grandfather clause that exempted most whites from literacy test).

4. See infra Part II.A.

5. See infra Part II.B.

6. See infra Part III.

Part II examines the current circuit split regarding whether plaintiffs can challenge felon disenfranchisement laws under section 2 of the VRA. Part III analyzes the need for a standard approach to these challenges and argues that a variation of sliding scale scrutiny is the best approach.

I. BACKGROUND

Statutes denying a felon the right to vote are conceptually basic. Upon conviction of a felony, a person loses his right to vote for a specific duration. However, challenges to these laws combine many legal principles. In order to appreciate how these principles interact, one should understand felon disenfranchisement laws' place in the history and future of voting rights jurisprudence.

A. The Right to Vote

Under Chief Justice Earl Warren the United States Supreme Court made significant advancements in identifying and protecting the right to vote. Prior to these advancements, many citizens found little assistance in the struggle to obtain voting rights. The Warren Court began protecting

8. See, e.g., Va. Const. art. II, § 1 ("No person who has been convicted of a felony shall be qualified to vote unless his civil rights have been restored by the Governor or other appropriate authority").

9. These challenges inextricably combine multiple legal doctrines such as fundamental rights and suspect class protection, or vote denial and vote dilution claims. See Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 309 (2d Cir. 2006) (confronting challenge to New York's felon disenfranchisement statute as both vote denial and vote dilution); cf City of Mobile v. Bolden, 446 U.S. 55, 113 (1980) (Marshall, J., dissenting) (discussing difference between fundamental rights protection and suspect class protection as applied to race based voting rights challenges).


11. Courts traditionally interpreted the original Constitution as a document of negative restrictions, failing to guarantee anyone the affirmative right to vote. See, e.g., Minor v. Happersett, 88 U.S. 162, 170-78 (1874) (holding that Constitution does not grant any citizen affirmative right to vote). The text of the original Constitution only required an election for the members of the House. U.S. Const. art I, § 4, cl. 1. Gradually, the notion of a protected right to vote emerged through the amendment process. See U.S. Const. adds. XIV, XVII, IXX, XXIV, XXVI (specifically referring to "right to vote" and prohibiting poll taxes). Further frustrating citizens' efforts to attain the right to vote was the Court's disposition to avoid voting claims by invoking the political question doctrine. See Colegrove v. Green, 328 U.S. 549, 552 (1946) (holding that a claim of inadequate representation and responsiveness was a political question and thus non-justiciable).
the right to vote by identifying voting as a fundamental right,12 thereby allowing the Fourteenth Amendment to serve as a vehicle for challenging statutes that abridge the right to vote.13 Consistent with the Supreme Court's fundamental rights jurisprudence, these challenges invoked strict scrutiny review.14

After recognizing a fundamental right to vote, the Supreme Court began identifying those entitled to this right. Gradually, the Court defined a core electorate of those individuals who satisfied the age, residency, citizenship, and non-felon status requirements set by their state legislatures.15 Absent a compelling state interest, the Supreme Court required states to enfranchise all individuals who satisfied these requirements.16 Accordingly, statutes disenfranchising members of the core electorate triggered strict

---

12. See Kramer, 395 U.S. at 626; Reynolds, 377 U.S. at 561–62 (stating that right to vote is fundamental in free and democratic society).
14. See Moore v. City of E. Cleveland, 431 U.S. 494, 499 (1977) (applying strict scrutiny to statute abridging fundamental right to familial living situation); Dunn, 405 U.S. at 337, 342 (applying strict scrutiny to Tennessee’s durational residency voting qualification); Stanley v. Illinois, 405 U.S. 645, 657–58 (1972) (applying strict scrutiny to statute abridging fundamental right to familial custody); Kramer, 395 U.S. at 626–27 (applying strict scrutiny to statute abridging fundamental right to vote); Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1, 12 (1967) (applying strict scrutiny to statute abridging fundamental right to marry).
16. See Kramer, 395 U.S. at 628–29. A sole exception to this principle emerged through the development of the one person/one vote doctrine. See also Salyer Land Co. v. Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage Dist., 410 U.S. 719, 728 (1973) (recognizing that special purpose of district allowed for unequal vote weighing). When a local governing body is not part of the core government, associated electoral schemes that deny one person/one vote representation do not trigger strict scrutiny. See Ball v. James, 451 U.S. 355, 370 (1981) (finding one acre/one vote scheme permissible when irrigation district did not possess traditional government powers); Salyer, 410 U.S. at 728 (finding one acre/one vote scheme permissible when district had a special, limited purpose and disproportionate impact); Richard Briffault, Who Rules at Home?: One Person/One Vote and Local Governments, 60 U. Chi. L. Rev. 339, 362–67 (1993) (discussing one person/one vote doctrine and exceptions for local governments).
scrutiny because those members had a fundamental right to vote. Under strict scrutiny, a challenged statute is only valid if it is necessary in achieving a compelling state interest. Statutes disenfranchising non-members, however, triggered only rational basis review because people outside of the core electorate do not have a fundamental right to vote. Under rational basis review, such statutes are valid if they are rationally related to achieving a legitimate state interest.

Despite conforming to fundamental rights jurisprudence, applying strict scrutiny to every restriction of the core electorate’s right to vote proved unworkable. In the early 1990s, the Supreme Court realized that any statute regulating elections theoretically imposes some restriction on voting rights. If the Court applied strict scrutiny to all election statutes, many would be found unconstitutional. For fear of infringing states’ autonomy in controlling elections, the Court sought a new approach that did not employ strict scrutiny irrespective of the voting restriction’s severity. Instead, the Court believed that adjusting the level of scrutiny relative to the severity of the voting restriction better respected states’ autonomy.

B. Burdick v. Takushi

In Burdick v. Takushi, the Supreme Court adopted sliding scale scrutiny as a workable approach to voting rights claims under the Fourteenth Amendment. In Burdick, a registered voter filed suit against the Hawaii Director of Elections to challenge Hawaii’s write-in candidacy prohibition. The plaintiff framed the challenge as one of voting rights infringement because the prohibition prevented him from voting for the person he wished to elect. The District Court for the District of Hawaii

17. See, e.g., Dunn, 405 U.S. at 337, 342 (using strict scrutiny to sustain challenge to residency restriction by plaintiff who was bona fide resident).
22. See id. (acknowledging that election laws invariably impose some amount of burden on voters).
23. See id. at 433–34.
24. See id.
25. See id. at 433.
26. Id. at 434.
27. Id. at 430.
28. Id. at 430–32.
granted summary judgment for the plaintiff. On appeal, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed this decision, holding that Hawaii's ban on write-in candidacy served a legitimate state interest. The Supreme Court granted certiorari to decide whether and when a state's power to regulate elections could justify infringing a core electorate member's voting rights.

The Supreme Court held that Hawaii's interest in regulating elections outweighed the minimal burden on the plaintiff's right to vote. In reaching this conclusion, the Court adopted the sliding scale approach used in cases regarding a candidate's ability to appear on a ballot. Using this approach, the Burdick Court found a minimal burden on the plaintiff's voting rights because a candidate of choice could easily access the ballot. The Court then identified several legitimate state interests that sufficiently justified the minimal burden on the plaintiff's right to vote.

In cases following Burdick, the Court began adjusting the level of scrutiny based on how severely the challenged regulation burdened the right to vote. Under this approach, a statute imposing a slight burden on voting rights triggers rational basis review. However, a statute imposing a severe burden receives strict scrutiny. Thus, before applying the appropriate level of scrutiny, a court confronting a voting rights challenge must first determine the severity of the burden. This analysis became the accepted judicial approach to voting rights claims under the Fourteenth Amendment.

32. Id. at 439 (discussing state's interest in avoiding "possibility of unrestrained factionalism at the general election" (quoting Munro v. Socialist Workers Party, 479 U.S. 189, 196 (1986)).
33. See id. at 434; Anderson v. Celebrezze, 460 U.S. 780, 788–89 (1983) (applying sliding scale scrutiny to ballot access claim). The Court justified borrowing this approach from candidates' rights cases because one cannot easily separate the rights of voters and candidates. Burdick, 504 U.S. at 438 (citing Bullock v. Carter, 405 U.S. 134, 143 (1972)).
35. Id. at 439–40.
36. See cases cited infra notes 44–47.
37. See Burdick, 504 U.S. at 438–39 (applying relaxed standard of review because burden is slight); Werme v. Merrill, 84 F.3d 479, 485–86 (1st Cir. 1996) (applying rational basis review).
39. See Burdick, 504 U.S. at 434.
40. See generally Werme, 84 F.3d at 483–84, (applying Burdick analysis to voting rights claim); Schulz v. Williams, 44 F.3d 48, 55–56 (2d Cir. 1994) (applying Burdick analysis to voting rights claim); Partnoy v. Shelley, 277 F. Supp. 2d 1064, 1073 (S.D. Cal. 2003) (applying Burdick analysis to voting rights claim). However, in Bush v. Gore, a relatively modern
Borrowing from European models, statutes disenfranchising citizens as punishment for a crime date back to colonial times in the United States. Over time, these laws became both more common and more severe. That is, as the number of states enacting such laws increased, the durations of disenfranchisement increased as well.

Today, four categories of felon disenfranchisement laws exist, imposing burdens of varying degrees on a felon’s ability to vote. First, fourteen states and the District of Columbia prevent a felon from voting only for the duration of the felon’s incarceration. Second, five states extend the voting restrictions beyond incarceration and prohibit voting while a felon is on parole. Third, thirty states disenfranchise felons beyond parole and prevent a felon from voting during the probationary period. Finally, two states prevent a felon from voting forever.

The statutory language of felon disenfranchisement laws also varies. While some laws disenfranchise citizens upon conviction for a felony offense, others disenfranchise citizens upon conviction for crimes of moral turpitude. Such differences in statutory language allow two states to en-
force otherwise comparable laws imposing equal durations of disenfranchise-ment in different manners.\textsuperscript{50} For example, when applying their state's statutory language, courts in one state may permanently disenfranchise citizens upon conviction for any felony.\textsuperscript{51} At the same time, courts in another state may permanently disenfranchise citizens only upon conviction of certain crimes—quite possibly those of which minorities are more commonly convicted.\textsuperscript{52} In fact, some bygone state legislatures have intentionally manipulated the statutory language of felon disenfranchisement laws to have this effect.\textsuperscript{53}

1. The Impact of Felon Disenfranchisement Laws

Felon disenfranchisement laws deny over 5.3 million otherwise qualified voters the opportunity to elect their governmental representatives.\textsuperscript{54} These laws deny more American citizens the right to cast a ballot than any other voting restriction.\textsuperscript{55} In states imposing a lifetime ban, some experts estimate that forty percent of the next generation of African American males may eventually suffer permanent disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite racially neutral language, felon disenfranchisement statutes disproportionately affect racial minority groups.\textsuperscript{57} In 2004, one in twelve African Americans could not vote because of felon disenfranchisement

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[51.] See, e.g., Ky. Const. § 145.
\item[53.] See Hunter, 471 U.S. at 226–27.
\item[55.] See Behrens, supra note 41, at 231.
\item[56.] See The Sentencing Project, supra note 44.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
laws.\textsuperscript{58} In contrast, these laws prevent only about one in sixty non-African Americans from voting.\textsuperscript{59}

This disproportionate impact is the result of minority over-representation among felons in most states.\textsuperscript{60} Many scholars believe that this is the result of unequal treatment of minorities throughout the criminal justice system.\textsuperscript{61} In many states, the government disproportionately stops, searches, arrests, books, charges, convicts, and sentences minorities as compared to non-minorities.\textsuperscript{62}

Because this unequal treatment varies by state, felon disenfranchisement statutes in some states more severely affect minorities than do similar statutes in other states. For example, in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, the disenfranchisement rate of African Americans is more than seventeen times greater than that of non-African Americans.\textsuperscript{63} By contrast, Hawaii disenfranchises proportionally fewer African Americans than non-African Americans.\textsuperscript{64} Consequently, the degree to which felon disenfranchisement statutes result in a racially skewed impact on voting rights also varies by state.

2. Richardson v. Ramirez

After the Warren Court began protecting voting rights, felons attempted to challenge the statutes that disenfranchised them.\textsuperscript{65} In Ramirez,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{58} See King, supra note 57, at 2 (2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Id.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} See Behrens, supra note 41, at 244–45.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} See King, supra note 57, at 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} See Elizabeth A. Hull, The Disenfranchisement of Ex-Felons 11 (2006) (listing disenfranchisement rates by race and state).
  \item \textsuperscript{65} See supra Part I.A; see, e.g., Hunter v. Underwood, 471 U.S. 222, 223–24 (1985) (challenging state’s felon disenfranchisement statute under Fourteenth Amendment); Richardson v. Ramirez, 418 U.S. 24, 27 (1974) (challenging state’s felon disenfranchisement statute under Fourteenth Amendment); Allen v. Ellisor, 664 F.2d 391, 395 (4th Cir. 1981) (challenging state’s felon disenfranchisement statute under Fourteenth Amendment).
felons from California challenged that state's disenfranchisement statute under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The felons invoked original jurisdiction in the Supreme Court of California by seeking a writ of mandate compelling election officials to register them to vote. The California Supreme Court held that the challenged statute violated the Equal Protection Clause, and the state subsequently appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

Despite the clear impact on felons' voting rights, the Supreme Court sustained the law without employing strict scrutiny. Instead, the Court found authorization for felon disenfranchisement statutes in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. This section explicitly exempts states from reduced representation in the House of Representatives when disenfranchising citizens for participation in rebellion or other crime. By declining to subject felon disenfranchisement laws to strict scrutiny, the Ramirez Court ended the Fourteenth Amendment's potential as a vehicle for challenges to these laws. Following Ramirez, courts now routinely apply rational basis review to Fourteenth Amendment felon disenfranchisement challenges and find legitimate justifications for such laws.

---

66. Richardson, 418 U.S. at 27.
68. Id. at 216–17; see Richardson v. Ramirez, 414 U.S. 816, 816 (1973) (granting certiorari).
69. Richardson, 418 U.S. at 41–42, 54; see U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2.
70. Richardson, 418 U.S. at 41–42, 54 (finding affirmative authorization for felon disenfranchisement statutes in Section 2 of Fourteenth Amendment); see U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2.
71. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2.
72. Richardson, 418 U.S. at 54–55; see also Allen v. Ellisor, 664 F.2d 391, 395 (4th Cir. 1981) (stating that Richardson decision closed door to equal protection challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes). Several years later, the Court held that the equal protection doctrine was not entirely unavailable to felons wishing to challenge the laws that disenfranchise them. Hunter v. Underwood, 471 U.S. 222, 233 (1985) (holding that when plaintiff can establish invidious legislative intent, statute will be subject to strict scrutiny). Without direct evidence of invidious intent, plaintiffs are currently unable to invoke heightened scrutiny of felon disenfranchisement challenges under the Fourteenth Amendment. See Hunter, 471 U.S. at 230–31.
D. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act and the 1982 Amendments

In 1965, Congress enacted the VRA to protect the voting power of minorities in the United States.\(^74\) Due to the historical clash between state legislatures and the federal government when regulating or protecting voting rights, the VRA is an intentionally broad and prophylactic statute that prevents discriminatory voting regulations.\(^75\) Consistent with that intent, the Supreme Court requires that courts interpret and apply this Act as broadly as possible.\(^76\)

Section 2 of the VRA prohibits states from denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color.\(^77\) There are two traditional categories of challenges under section 2.\(^78\) In vote dilution challenges, plaintiffs allege that a voting scheme—commonly a districting arrangement—diminishes minorities’ political influence without denying them the opportunity to vote.\(^79\) In vote denial challenges, by contrast, plaintiffs allege that a voting regulation disproportionately diminishes minorities’ ability to cast ballots.\(^80\)

In 1980, the Supreme Court faced a redistricting challenge that questioned the proper judicial approach to section 2 claims.\(^81\) In *City of Mobile v. Bolden* the Court decided that section 2 paralleled the Fifteenth Amendment and provided no additional voting protection for minori-

---


76. See Chisom v. Roemer, 501 U.S. 380, 403 (1990) (Warning that even if courts foresee problems in applying congressionally mandated totality of circumstances approach, courts cannot adopt judicially created limitation on coverage of VRA); Allen, 393 U.S. at 566–67 (requiring broad interpretation of VRA).


78. See Tokaji, supra note 7, at 691–92.

79. See id.

80. See id.

ties. As such, plaintiffs would need to establish invidious legislative intent to prevail on any claim under section 2 of the VRA. This approach imposed a seemingly insurmountable burden on plaintiffs that neither Congress nor civil rights activists accepted.

In response to the Court's decision in City of Mobile, the Senate emphasized section 2 during re-enactment proceedings for section 4 of the VRA, which lists universally prohibited state voting prerequisites and devices. Congress ultimately decided that, while Fifteenth Amendment voting rights challenges require proof of actual discriminatory legislative intent, challenges grounded in section 2 do not. Instead, Congress mandated a "totality of circumstances" analysis for section 2 purposes and identified seven appropriate factors of this analysis. Congress mandated this approach to ensure that section 2 reaches all laws resulting in discriminatory voting rights infringement, instead of only the intentionally discriminatory laws.

Recently, plaintiffs have begun interpreting section 2 of the VRA as a plausible vehicle for challenging felon disenfranchisement laws. These plaintiffs argue that because felon disenfranchisement laws have a racially disparate impact on voting rights, they fall within the scope of section 2.

82. Id.
83. Id. at 62.
88. See S. Rep. No. 97-417, at 30 (emphasizing that amended language shows that plaintiffs need only show that system or practice results unequal minority access to political process, and not invidious intent). But see City of Mobile v. Bolden, 446 U.S. 55, 60–62 (employing an intent test in analyzing section 2 challenge before 1982 amendments).
90. See, e.g., Hayden, 449 F.3d at 310–12 (featuring section 2 challenge to felon disenfranchisement statute); Muntaqim v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102, 103–06 (2d Cir. 2004) (featuring section 2 challenge to felon disenfranchisement statute); Johnson v. Bush 214 F. Supp. 2d 1333, 1335, 1341–42 (S.D. Fla. 2002) (featuring section 2 challenge to felon
However, under the current interpretation of the VRA, it is unclear if a given court will sustain a challenge to these laws under section 2.

II. THE CURRENT SPLIT OF AUTHORITY

Despite its broad language and Congress's expansive intent, courts disagree about section 2's ability to reach felon disenfranchisement statutes. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has found that section 2 is a plausible vehicle for challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws. The Second Circuit Court of Appeals, however, has held that plaintiffs simply cannot challenge felon disenfranchisement laws under section 2. Considering this split in authority, review by the Supreme Court appears to be both necessary and probable.

A. The Ninth Circuit Allows VRA Challenges

In Farrakhan v. Washington, ex-felons in Washington challenged their disenfranchisement, asserting that the state's felon disenfranchisement provision violated section 2 of the VRA. The District Court for the Eastern


91. Compare Farrakhan, 338 F.3d 1009 (allowing felon disenfranchisement challenge under section 2), and Wesley v. Collins, 791 F.2d 1255, 1259-60 (6th Cir. 1986) (holding, implicitly, that courts can sustain challenge by applying section 2 analysis to challenged felon disenfranchisement law), with Hayden, 449 F.3d 305 (precluding felon disenfranchisement challenge under section 2), and Johnson v. Bush, 405 F.3d 1214 (11th Cir. 2005) (precluding felon disenfranchisement challenge under section 2).

92. See Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1016. See generally Wesley, 791 F.2d 1255 (engaging in analysis of felon disenfranchisement challenge brought under section 2).

93. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 328; Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1234–35.

94. Some courts have discussed the need for Supreme Court review of this issue. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 310 (noting circuit split and discussing need for Supreme Court review); Muntaqim v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102, 104 (2d Cir. 2004) (noting circuit split and discussing need for Supreme Court review). Following the Ninth Circuit's decision in Farrakhan, the State of Washington immediately filed a motion for certiorari in the United States Supreme Court, but the Court denied this motion. Locke v. Farrakhan, 543 U.S. 984, 984 (2004). Some scholars believe that the Court denied certiorari for lack a final judgment, given that the Ninth Circuit remanded the case for further analysis. See Edward B. Foley, Felon Disenfranchisement Reaches the Supreme Court, Election Law at Moritz, http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/electionlaw/ebook/part1/eligibility_felon02.html (last visited Feb. 12, 2007) [hereinafter Foley, Voter Eligibility]. After another district court judgment for the state, the case is currently facing a second appellate review by the Ninth Circuit. Farrakhan v. Gregoire, 2006 WL 1889273 (E.D. Wash. July 7, 2006). After final review by Ninth Circuit, it is likely that the Supreme Court will grant certiorari either in Farrakhan or in a similar felon disenfranchisement case. See Foley, Voter Eligibility, supra.

95. 338 F.3d at 1016, 1011–12 (9th Cir. 2003); See Wash. Const. art. VI, § 3.
District of Washington held that, although section 2 allows such challenges, the challenged law did not violate that provision. On appeal, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals confirmed that section 2 permits challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes, but remanded the case for proper analysis.

The Ninth Circuit initially emphasized that the text of section 2 proscribes voting qualifications that result in a racially disparate infringement on voting rights. The court recognized that, by definition, felon disenfranchisement laws impose a voting qualification on the electorate. Thus, the Ninth Circuit ultimately concluded that a felon disenfranchisement law can violate the VRA if it results in a racially disparate denial of voting rights.

The Ninth Circuit also recognized the policy implications of denying felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2. The court acknowledged that all citizens, even ex-felons, have the right to be free from racially discriminatory voting regulations. Mindful of this right, the Ninth Circuit allowed the plaintiffs to challenge Washington's felon disenfranchisement law under section 2.

---

96. Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1011.

97. Id. at 1016, 1020. Unlike the District Court, the Ninth Circuit found that internal biases in the criminal justice system should be part of the totality of circumstances analysis. Id. at 1020. Consequently, the Ninth Circuit remanded the case, and instructed the district court to consider this evidence when analyzing the claim. Id.


99. See Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1016 (declaring that felon disenfranchisement statute is voting qualification, and section 2 clearly proscribes any voting qualification that denies citizen's right to vote in discriminatory manner).

100. See id. at 1016–17. Courts opposed to allowing these challenges find some ambiguity in the statutory language of the VRA in order to justify looking beyond the plain text. See, e.g., Johnson v. Bush, 405 F.3d 1214, 1229 n.30 (11th Cir. 2005) (finding some ambiguity in language of section 2). For example, the Eleventh Circuit finds that the phrase “on account of race or color” is ambiguous. Id. However, when faced with the same issue, the Second Circuit failed to identify any ambiguity within the text. See Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 346 (2d Cir. 2006) (Parker, J., dissenting). Instead, that court justified looking beyond the text when interpreting section 2 because it was not convinced that the language is unambiguous. See id.

101. Farrakhan, 338 F.3d at 1016.

102. Id.

103. Id.
The Second Circuit Court of Appeals has held that challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws cannot succeed under the VRA.\textsuperscript{104} In Hayden \textit{v.} Pataki, ex-felon citizens of New York and non-felon minority citizens filed suit to challenge New York's felon disenfranchisement law.\textsuperscript{105} The District Court for the Southern District of New York granted judgment on the pleadings for the defendants, ruling that plaintiffs cannot challenge the law under section 2.\textsuperscript{106} On appeal, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the district court's decision.\textsuperscript{107} Instead of analyzing the merits of the claim, this court focused on the consequences of allowing courts to accept felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2.\textsuperscript{108}

The Second Circuit predicted that allowing felon disenfranchisement challenges would create a series of unintended constitutional problems for the VRA.\textsuperscript{109} First, allowing courts to strike these laws under the VRA could result in an unconstitutionally broad use of Congress's enforcement powers.\textsuperscript{110} That is, Congress passed the VRA under authority of the enforcement powers granted in Section 2 of the Fifteenth Amendment, which affords Congress the power to enact appropriate statutes to enforce the Amendment.\textsuperscript{111} To constitute a valid use of this power, however, an enacted statute must be "congruent and proportional" to the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[104.] See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 309-10. The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals has faced a similar challenge to Florida's felon disenfranchisement law, and also rejected the challenge under section 2. Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1234 (holding that felon disenfranchisement laws are immune from VRA challenges).
  \item[105.] Hayden, 449 F.3d at 311. The plaintiffs in Hayden included non-felon minorities in order to pursue both a vote denial and vote dilution challenge under section 2. \textit{Id.} at 310-11; see also discussion of vote denial and vote dilution challenges under section 2 \textit{supra} Part I.D.
  \item[106.] Hayden v. Pataki, No. 00 Civ. 8586(LMM), 2004 WL 1335921, at *5 (S.D.N.Y. June 14, 2004).
  \item[107.] Hayden, 449 F.3d at 328.
  \item[108.] See \textit{id.}; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1234 (rejecting section 2 challenge because of constitutional concerns).
  \item[109.] See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 328; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1234 (rejecting section 2 challenge because of constitutional concerns).
  \item[110.] See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 335-37 (Walker, J., concurring); see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1230-32. Under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment and Section 2 of the Fifteenth Amendment, Congress may enact "appropriate legislation" to enforce those amendments. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 5, amend. XV, § 2.
  \item[111.] See U.S. Const. amend. XV, § 2; City of Rome \textit{v.} United States, 446 U.S. 156, 173 (1980) (stating that Congress passed VRA under authority of the Fifteenth Amendment's enforcement clause); South Carolina \textit{v.} Katzenbach, 383 U.S. 301, 327 (1966) (discussing Congress's use of Fifteenth Amendment's enforcement clause when enacting VRA). But see Hayden, 449 F.3d at 358 (Parker, J., dissenting) (stating that Congress enacted VRA under enforcement powers in both Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Felon Disenfranchisement Challenges

record of evil. The Second Circuit acknowledged that prior to enacting the VRA, Congress did not develop a specific record of racial discrimination resulting from felon disenfranchisement laws. In the absence of a specific record, the court predicted that the VRA will exceed Congress's enforcement powers if courts accept felon disenfranchisement challenges.

Second, the Second Circuit found that allowing these challenges would unconstitutionally alter the balance of power between the federal and state governments. Recognizing states' broad powers to regulate elections, the Second Circuit concluded that allowing the VRA to cover felon disenfranchisement laws would restrict this power. Accordingly, the court held that section 2 of the VRA cannot cover such statutes absent a clear statement of intent to alter the federal-state balance.

Finally, the Second Circuit reasoned that allowing felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 of the VRA conflicts with the Fourteenth Amendment. Similar to the Ramirez Court, the Second

113. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 335–37 (Walker, J., concurring); Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1230–32.
114. Hayden, 449 F.3d at 335–36. While this argument lacks merit absent a standard, predictable approach to vote denial claims, there are potential flaws to this argument even at first glance. See discussion infra Parts III.A., III.C. First, the Supreme Court has not required that the congressional record be entirely specific relative to the breadth of Congress's resulting action. See Nev. Dep't of Human Res. v. Hibbs, 538 U.S. 721, 727–28 (2003) (acknowledging that Congress may enact prophylactic legislation that proscribes facially constitutional conduct in order to prevent subsequent unconstitutional conduct). Furthermore, the Court has also held that when Congress is using this power to protect the interests of a suspect class, the scope of this power is great. See Boerne, 521 U.S. at 526 (affirming the necessity of using strong remedial and preventive means of responding to America's significant history of racial discrimination). Additionally, the scope of the defined evil significantly affects the merits of this rationale. See Fla. Prepaid Postsecondary Educ. Expense Bd. v. Coll. Sav. Bank, 527 U.S. 627, 639–40 (1999) (discussing need for court to identify purported evil before determining if Congress exceeded enforcement powers). While The VRA was not a response to a significant record of intentionally discriminatory felon disenfranchisement statutes, Congress was responding to countless discriminatory voting restrictions. See Behrens, supra note 41, at 244–47.
115. Hayden, 449 F.3d at 310–11, 323; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1232 n.35.
116. Hayden, 449 F.3d at 326; see U.S. CONST. art. I, § 4, cl. 1 (declaring, "The Times, Places, and Manner of holding Elections ... shall be prescribed in each state by the Legislature thereof"); Tashjian v. Republican Party of Conn., 479 U.S. 208, 217 (1986) (stating that Constitution grants states broad power to prescribe times, places, and manner of elections and that this results in significant state control over elections); supra Part I.A (discussing federal judicial protection of the right to vote). However, this power is not unlimited. See Foster v. Love, 522 U.S. 67, 69 (1997) (discussing ability of Congress to preempt state voting regulations); discussion infra Part III.C.
118. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 316; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1228. The Supreme Court has previously held that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment expressly affirms
Circuit found affirmative authorization for these laws in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. If section 2 of the VRA were to reach felon disenfranchisement laws, then, the court foresaw a conflict because the VRA could strike state laws that the Constitution validates. In order to avoid this constitutional conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment, the Second Circuit precludes felon disenfranchisement challenges under the VRA.

III. Solution: Developing a New Approach to VRA Vote Denial Challenges to Felon Disenfranchisement Laws

Currently, there is no standard judicial approach to reviewing felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 of the VRA. The Supreme Court has developed an approach to vote dilution claims brought under section 2. However, the Court has not developed a

states' ability to disenfranchise felons. See U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2 (declining to reduce state's representation when state denies right to vote for participation in rebellion or other crime); Richardson v. Ramirez, 418 U.S. 24, 54 (1974) (holding that Section 2 of Fourteenth Amendment allows states to disenfranchise felons).

119. See Richardson, 418 U.S. at 54; Hayden, 449 F.3d at 316; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1228; see discussion supra Part I.C.2. These courts hold that Section 2 of this Amendment affirms states' right to disenfranchise felons by declining to reduce a state's representation for doing so. See U.S. Const. Amend. XIV, § 2; Hayden, 449 F.3d at 316.

120. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 316; see also Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1228-29.

121. Hayden, 449 F.3d at 316; The canon of constitutional avoidance is a valid approach to statutory interpretation. See, e.g., Clark v. Martinez, 543 U.S. 371, 381–84 (2005) (discussing avoidance canon); Oregon v. Mitchell, 400 U.S. 112, 131 (1970) (discussing need to interpret statute in way to avoid constitutional conflict); Adrian Vermeule, Saving Constructions, 85 Geo. L.J. 1945, 1960–61 (1997) (discussing need to interpret statute in way to avoid constitutional conflict). However, the argument is faulty. See infra Part III.B.2.

122. This is true when the plaintiff frames the challenge as a vote denial claim. See Tokaji, supra note 7, at 709 (discussing well-established approach to vote dilution claims and acknowledging lack of comparable approach to vote denial claims). This Article looks specifically at these challenges when framed as vote denial claims, despite the fact that plaintiffs could rationally challenge these laws as resulting in vote dilution. See Hayden 449 F.3d at 309 (challenging New York's felon disenfranchisement statute under both vote denial and vote dilution frameworks); King, supra note 54, at 19.

standard approach to vote denial claims, which include most VRA challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws.\textsuperscript{124}

Until the Court adopts an approach to vote denial claims, the constitutionality of extending the VRA to felon disenfranchisement laws is unclear. If courts apply strict scrutiny to all vote denial claims, they will likely invalidate many state voting regulations.\textsuperscript{125} If courts do invalidate these regulations, the VRA would impinge states' powers to regulate elections and would transcend the congressional record of discriminatory voting regulations.\textsuperscript{126} Thus, such an approach would suggest that the VRA unconstitutionally alters the federal-state balance of powers and exceeds Congress's Fifteenth Amendment enforcement powers.\textsuperscript{127} However, if courts apply only rational basis review to all claims, the VRA will not invalidate any felon disenfranchisement statute that does not already violate the Fourteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{128} In this case, the VRA would neither alter the federal-state balance of powers nor exceed Congress's enforcement powers; therefore, it would be constitutional.\textsuperscript{129} Thus, the VRA's constitutionality if courts accept felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 depends entirely on how courts review vote denial claims.

\textsuperscript{124} See Tokaji, \textit{supra} note 7, at 704-09 (contrasting clear approach to vote dilution claims with lack of clear approach to vote denial claims); see, e.g., Johnson, 405 F.3d 1214 (11th Cir. 2005) (pursuing vote denial cause of action under section 2); Farrakhan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009 (9th Cir. 2003) (pursuing vote denial cause of action under section 2). The Court must identify an approach to vote denial claims because section 2 addresses both racially biased vote denial and vote dilution. See Voting Rights Act § 2, 42 U.S.C. 1973 (2007) (proscribing denial of right to vote on account of race or color); Hayden, 449 F.3d at 367-78 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting). In fact, some Supreme Court justices have suggested that the VRA should only address vote denial claims, and not claims of vote dilution. See Holder, 512 U.S. at 893 (Thomas, J., dissenting) (arguing that section 2 only reaches state regulations that reduce citizens access to ballot).

\textsuperscript{125} See 16B AM. JUR. 2D Constitutional Law § 815 (2006) (referring to strict scrutiny as heavy burden of justification on state).

\textsuperscript{126} See discussion of constitutional concerns \textit{supra} Part II.B.

\textsuperscript{127} See discussion of constitutional concerns \textit{supra} Part II.B.

\textsuperscript{128} Because there are so many plausible state interests in denying felons' voting rights, felon disenfranchisement laws will uniformly pass traditional rational basis review. See, e.g., Hayden, 449 F.3d at 326 (mentioning three plausible state interests that support felon disenfranchisement statutes); Owens v. Barnes, 711 F.2d 25, 28 (3d Cir. 1983) (discussing rational justifications for felon disenfranchisement statutes); Green v. Bd. of Elections, 380 F.2d 445, 451-52 (2d Cir. 1967) (discussing possible justifications for felon disenfranchisement statutes). Under modern Fourteenth Amendment jurisprudence, felon disenfranchisement challenges trigger rational basis review, suggesting that this amendment is no longer an effective vehicle for such challenges. See Johnson v. Bush, 214 F Supp. 2d 1333, 1338 (S.D. Fla. 2002) (deciding that felon disenfranchisement statutes are incapable of violating either Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection or Due Process clauses). But see Elena Saxonhouse, Note, \textit{Unequal Protection: Comparing Former Felons' Challenges to Disenfranchisement and Employment Discrimination}, 56 STAN. L. REV. 1597, 1623-27 (2004) (suggesting that Fourteenth Amendment may still have power for felon disenfranchisement challenges).

\textsuperscript{129} See discussion of enforcement powers \textit{supra} pp. 34-35.
Accordingly, the Supreme Court cannot determine whether the VRA may constitutionally reach felon disenfranchisement laws until it decides how to approach vote denial claims. The following section proposes a variation of Burdick’s sliding scale scrutiny as an approach to vote denial challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws under the VRA.

A. The Mechanics of the New Sliding Scale Approach to Felon Disenfranchisement Challenges

As described in Burdick, there are two prongs of sliding scale scrutiny analysis. First, a court must determine the severity of the burden a challenged statute imposes on voting rights. Second, a court must then select and apply the appropriate level of scrutiny to the statute. Courts applying the Burdick form of sliding scale scrutiny have failed to establish clear requirements for fulfilling each prong. However, characteristics of felon disenfranchisement challenges allow courts to identify specific evidentiary requirements that plaintiffs must satisfy.

1. Establishing a Vote Denial Challenge to a Felon Disenfranchisement Statute

The proposed form of sliding scale scrutiny requires a plaintiff to prove three elements in order to establish a vote denial claim under section 2. First, a plaintiff must show that he cannot vote because of the

130. See Burdick v. Takushi, 504 U.S. 428, 433–34 (1992); see infra Part III.A.
131. See Burdick, 504 U.S. at 433–34.
132. See id. at 434.
133. See id.
134. The Burdick form of this analysis fails to guide courts specifically in the threshold determination of the severity of the burden. See id. at 434 (instructing courts to weigh character and magnitude of burden, without identifying specific factors of this analysis). While some courts require significant statistical evidence to show the burden is severe, many courts seem to determine the severity of the burden instinctively. Compare Bullock v. Carter, 405 U.S. 134, 142–45 (1972) (using intuition to decide if burden is severe), with Cal. Democratic Party v. Jones, 530 U.S. 567, 578–82 (2000) (relying on plaintiff’s evidence to determine that burden is severe).
135. By combining factors that courts and scholars currently discuss when addressing felon disenfranchisement challenges, the proposed approach simplifies the required totality of the circumstances analysis. Voting Rights Act § 2b, 42 U.S.C. 1973 (2007) (requiring totality of circumstances analysis for section 2 claim); see Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 314 n.7 (2d Cir. 2006) (mentioning that challenged New York statute was narrower in scope than felon disenfranchisement statutes in other states); Farrakhan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009, 1013 (9th Cir. 2003) (discussing plaintiff’s evidence of racial bias in state’s criminal justice); Tokaji, supra note 7, at 724 (proposing that section 2 plaintiffs must be able to trace voting rights infringement to bias in social and historical conditions). The three threshold elements are theoretically analogous to the approach to vote dilution chal-
state's felon disenfranchisement statute. This requirement is critical in characterizing the claim as one of vote denial—as opposed to vote dilution—under section 2.

Second, a plaintiff must develop a record of statistical data suggesting racial bias in the state's criminal justice system. Because it is theoretically possible for minorities to commit felonies more frequently than non-minorities, evidence showing only minority over-representation among felons fails to establish de jure bias. However, a plaintiff can establish bias through a combination of evidence that the state disproportionately stops, searches, arrests, charges, convicts, and/or severely sentences minorities.

Finally, a plaintiff must demonstrate a connection between the denial of his right to vote and the statistical racial bias in the criminal justice system. A plaintiff can demonstrate this connection by showing that his race—or, at least, the racial category in which society places him—faces

---


137. While a disenfranchised felon may theoretically pursue both a vote dilution and vote denial claim, a non-disenfranchised felon could not pursue a vote denial claim. See Tokaji, supra note 7, at 691–92 (contrasting vote denial and vote dilution claims under section 2); supra notes 78–80 and accompanying text.

138. It is important that a plaintiff need not prove that his individual status as a felon is the result of tangible incidents of racial bias. See Tokaji, supra note 7 at 724 (stating that section 2 plaintiffs need not prove intentional discrimination by state actor to establish a vote denial claim). Such a requirement would present an insurmountable burden on plaintiffs and would contradict the 1982 section 2 amendments and the totality of the circumstances approach. See supra Part I.D. Furthermore, should a plaintiff prove specific incidents of racial bias, the plaintiff would have a cause of action under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. See supra note 72 and accompanying text; infra note 214.

139. See 16B Am. Jur. 2d Constitutional Law § 815 (stating that although disparate impact may be relevant evidence of racial discrimination, standing alone, this evidence is insufficient); Tokaji, supra note 7, at 724–25 (suggesting that mere showing of overrepresentation among felons should not suffice to establish section 2 claim).

140. In Johnson v. Bush, the unsuccessful plaintiffs established no more than a discrepancy between minorities' representation in Florida's population and their representation among Florida's felons. 405 F.3d 1214, 1235 (11th Cir. 2005) (Tjoflat, J., concurring). One justice in Johnson wrote separately to acknowledge that, even if section 2 applied, the plaintiffs failed to establish bias in the criminal justice system. Id. In contrast, the Ninth Circuit has suggested that plaintiffs may prove bias through statistics showing racial disparities at multiple stages of the criminal justice system. Farrah Khan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009, 1013–14 (9th Cir. 2003). Thus, when facing these challenges today, the plaintiff's ability to provide such statistical evidence seems to have an effect on the court's analysis. Compare Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1235 (discussing unsuccessful plaintiffs' inability to prove racial bias through statistical evidence), with Farrah Khan, 338 F.3d at 1013–14 (discussing successful plaintiffs' ability to prove racial bias through statistical evidence).

141. See Tokaji, supra note 7, at 724 (proposing that section 2 plaintiffs must be able to trace voting rights infringement to bias in social and historical conditions).
bias in the criminal justice system.\textsuperscript{142} Importantly, citizens from this group must also suffer disproportionate rates of disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{143}

While fulfilling the three required elements establishes a prima facie vote denial challenge to felon disenfranchisement laws under section 2, it does not guarantee success.\textsuperscript{144} Under the proposed approach, a court only applies heightened scrutiny—which is most advantageous to plaintiffs—if the plaintiff can show that the statute substantially burdens voting rights.\textsuperscript{145} Accordingly, the second prong of the sliding scale approach requires a court to determine the level of scrutiny to apply based on the severity of the burden.\textsuperscript{146}

2. Determining the Appropriate Level of Scrutiny

After a plaintiff establishes a prima facie vote denial claim under section 2 of the VRA, the court must determine the appropriate level of scrutiny.\textsuperscript{147} In order to do so, the court must characterize the magnitude of the statute’s burden on the plaintiff’s voting ability using a two-factor analysis.\textsuperscript{148} The first factor of the analysis is the severity of the racial bias in

\begin{enumerate}
\item[142.] Because victims of racism suffer this primarily because of appearance, this approach does not require a biological connection with the discriminated-against race. See Ian F Haney Lopez, \textit{The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice}, 29 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 1, 1–5 (1994) (discussing how central appearance is to racial identification and relative legal implications). For example, that a plaintiff is not biologically Middle Eastern is irrelevant if a prejudiced society would nonetheless perceive him and treat him as such. See Ken Davison, \textit{Note and Comment, The Mixed-Race Experience: Treatment of Racially Miscategorized Individuals Under Title VII}, 12 ASIAN L.J. 161, 161–62 (2005) (stating that using physical features to determine race leads to racial miscategorization and results in misapplied prejudices). This plaintiff’s experience with the criminal justice system would inevitably mirror that of a person of Middle Eastern dissent. See \textit{id.}

\item[143.] Ultimately, this plaintiff may still lose the right to vote on account of race or color. See \textit{Voting Rights Act} § 2, 42 U.S.C. 1973 (2007).

\item[144.] The proposed factors seek to demonstrate that the felon disenfranchisement law results in discriminatory vote denial, based on the totality of the circumstances. \textit{Voting Rights Act} § 2b. The text of section 2 identifies this consideration as the standard for establishing a violation. \textit{Id.} (mandating a totality of the circumstances analysis for section 2 claims).


\item[146.] \textit{Id.}

\item[147.] \textit{Id.} (discussing requirement that court adjusts level of scrutiny relative to demonstrated burden on voting rights).

\item[148.] \textit{Id.}
the state's criminal justice system, as evidenced by statistics. The second factor is the scope of the state's disenfranchisement statute. The statute's scope is narrow when it disenfranchises a felon only during incarceration, yet it is most expansive when it disenfranchises a felon for life.

A plaintiff’s ability to prove racial bias combined with the scope of the law are the primary factors in determining the level of scrutiny. When a plaintiff establishes significant racial bias and the challenged statute is expansive in scope, courts should apply strict scrutiny. Conversely, when a plaintiff fails to show significant bias and the law is limited in scope, courts should apply rational basis review to the statute. If both the level of racial bias and the scope of the law are moderate, courts should apply intermediate scrutiny. Courts should
also apply intermediate scrutiny when the racial bias is severe but the scope of the law is limited, or vice versa.\footnote{155}

While these two factors will control the analysis, a court should have discretion to adjust the result relative to additional evidence of a severe burden.\footnote{156} Such evidence may include vague statutory language or evidence establishing any of the factors Congress codified during the 1982 amendment process.\footnote{157} These factors include, among others, the extent to which official discrimination and prejudice in social institutions affects minorities' ability to vote.\footnote{158} Allowing this adjustment serves two purposes. First, this discretion allows courts to incorporate additional, unanticipated evidence of a severe burden into their analyses.\footnote{159} Second, this discretion allows courts to comply with the congressionally mandated totality of the circumstances analysis.\footnote{160}

\section*{B. The Proposed Approach Should Apply to VRA Felon Disenfranchisement Challenges}

The proposed approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 of the VRA is an adaptation of \textit{Burdick}'s sliding scale scrutiny, which now applies to voting rights challenges brought under the Fourteenth Amendment.\footnote{161} Because the \textit{Burdick} approach currently applies to other voting rights cases, the Court would not be unfounded in adopting

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{155} In these situations, the burden on voting rights is also intermediate. See \textit{supra} note 154 and accompanying text.
\item \footnote{156} Excluding potentially relevant evidence beyond that which fulfills the threshold factors would contradict the totality of the circumstances analysis required by section 2. Voting Rights Act § 2b, 42 U.S.C. § 1973 (2007).
\item \footnote{157} S. \textit{Rep.} No. 97-417, at 28–29 (1982); see also \textit{White v. Regester}, 412 U.S. 755, 765–70 (1973) (using several factors to strike multimember district scheme); \textit{Zimmer v. McKeithen}, 485 F.2d 1297, 1305 (5th Cir. 1973) (discussing numerous factors, adopted from \textit{Regester}, that courts should use to find constitutional violation where plaintiff has not shown invidious intent); discussion of varying statutory language \textit{supra} Part I.C.1.
\item \footnote{158} S. \textit{Rep.} No. 97-417, at 28–29 (1982).
\item \footnote{159} The flexibility to accept additional evidence beyond the threshold requirements is important because, when targeting racially discriminatory voting regulations, bright line rules are not desirable. See \textit{Bush v. Vera}, 517 U.S. 952, 984 (1996) (stating that bright line rules are not available when confronting claims of racially discriminatory districting scheme). While the approach to vote dilution challenges features similar threshold evidentiary requirements, the Supreme Court supplements these factors by analyzing additional evidence of discriminatory impact. See \textit{Thornburg v. Gingles}, 478 U.S. 30, 50–51 (1986) (describing appropriate approach to vote dilution claims under section 2 of the VRA); \textit{Johnson v. De Grandy}, 512 U.S. 997, 1011–12 (1994) (deciding that full totality of circumstances analysis must follow bright line \textit{Gingles} preconditions for vote dilution challenge).
\item \footnote{160} See Voting Rights Act § 2, 42 U.S.C. § 1973 (2007); see also discussion of amendments to section 2, \textit{supra} Part I.D.
\item \footnote{161} See, e.g., \textit{Weber v. Shelley}, 347 F.3d 1101, 1106 (9th Cir. 2003); \textit{Werme v. Merrill}, 84 F.3d 479, 483–84 (1st Cir. 1996); \textit{Schulz v. Williams}, 44 F.3d 48, 55–56 (2d Cir. 1994).\end{itemize}
Felon Disenfranchisement Challenges

The proposed variation of sliding scale scrutiny enables courts to confront felon disenfranchisement challenges uniformly, in a manner consistent with both judicial precedent and legislative intent.

1. Consistent Judicial Application of Sliding Scale Scrutiny

The proposed approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 of the VRA will allow courts to approach these challenges in a consistent manner. An important function of the Supreme Court is to settle splits of authority so that federal laws apply uniformly to all citizens. However, the Burdick Court failed to achieve this goal when it inadequately delineated the correct analysis of a statute’s burden on voting rights under sliding scale scrutiny. As a result, courts have struggled to apply the Burdick variation of sliding scale scrutiny consistently. While some courts require plaintiffs to provide statistical evidence showing a severe burden on voting rights, other courts rely on intuition when weighing the burden. By contrast, the proposed form of sliding scale scrutiny identifies specific factors included in this analysis, thus allowing courts to confront felon disenfranchisement challenges consistently.

To ensure judicial consistency, the proposed approach exploits the common characteristics of felon disenfranchisement challenges brought under section 2. These claims unvaryingly allege that racial bias in a state’s criminal justice system results in voting rights infringement via the state’s disenfranchisement statute. Incorporating these commonalities into

162. See Burdick v. Takushi, 504 U.S. 428, 432–34 (1992); Anderson v. Celebrezze, 460 U.S. 780, 789–90 (1983). Anderson is a ballot access case, but the Court has acknowledged that laws that affect candidates have at least some indirect effect on voters. Bullock v. Carter, 405 U.S. 134, 143 (1972). In Burdick, the Court believed employing the approach used in ballot access cases was appropriate for voting rights cases, due to the similarity between these claims. 504 U.S. at 433. It would be at least as appropriate, then, to adopt a form of the analysis used in Fourteenth Amendment voting rights cases to apply to VRA cases.


164. See supra note 134 and accompanying text.

165. See supra note 134 and accompanying text.

166. See supra note 134 and accompanying text.

167. See, e.g., Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 310–12 (2d Cir. 2006) (featuring section 2 challenge to felon disenfranchisement statute); Muntaqim v. Coombe, 366 F.3d 102,
specific evidentiary requirements ensures that courts throughout the country will approach felon disenfranchisement challenges similarly. Not only will future plaintiffs know exactly what evidence they must provide, but they will also anticipate the scrutiny their claims will elicit.168

2. Consistency with Precedent and Legislative Intent

The Supreme Court has demanded the broadest possible interpretation and application of the VRA, warning that no judicially created limitation on its coverage is acceptable.169 However, absent a statutory exemption for felon disenfranchisement laws, precluding such challenges would result in a judicially created limitation on the VRA's coverage.170 Therefore, only an approach that allows courts to accept felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 honors the Supreme Court's VRA jurisprudence.171 The proposed approach allows courts to hear these section 2 challenges effectively and constitutionally.172

The proposed form of sliding scale scrutiny also allows courts to apply the VRA in a manner consistent with legislative intent. When amending section 2 in 1982, Congress identified seven factors signifying a denial or abridgement of voting rights based on the totality of circumstances.173 One of these factors is the extent to which the minority group suffers discrimination in social institutions such as education, employment, and health.174 These institutions are similar in that they substantially impact the quality of citizens' lives and accordingly face some amount of federal government regulation.175 The same is true for the criminal justice


170. Id.


172. See infra Part III.C (discussing constitutional considerations).

173. S. REP. No. 97-417, at 28–29 (1982); *Boyd, supra* note 84, at 1400 n.260 (discussing that codified factors were meant to adopt factors used in Court's analysis in White v. Regester, 412 U.S. 755, 765–70 (1973)).


Thus, bias in this institution satisfies a specified factor of the congressionally mandated totality of the circumstances analysis. Therefore, ignoring bias in the criminal justice system would contradict Congress's intent when enacting the VRA. However, the proposed approach complies with legislative intent by allowing courts to analyze historical evidence of bias in the criminal justice system.

Those opposed to courts accepting challenges to felon disenfranchisement statutes under section 2 might claim that Congress excluded these laws from the VRA. When amending section 4 of the VRA, which lists absolutely prohibited voting regulations, Congress chose not to add felon disenfranchisement statutes to this list. Furthermore, one Senator emphasized that the amended section 4 would not invalidate felon disenfranchisement laws. This argument suggests that, by excluding felon disenfranchisement laws from section 4, Congress intended to exclude these voting regulations from all sections of the VRA.

However, this argument fails because the legislative history of one section of the VRA does not represent Congress's intent in another section. By not adding felon disenfranchisement statutes to section 4,

179. See, e.g., Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 318–319 (2d Cir. 2006) (deciding that Congress intended to exclude felon disenfranchisement laws from purview of entire VRA).
182. This argument focuses on the fact that Congress had the opportunity to include felon disenfranchisement statutes among the state practices uniformly prohibited by section 4. See, e.g., Hayden, 449 F.3d at 318–319 (discussing argument that Congress intended to exclude felon disenfranchisement laws from scope of VRA). By declining to do so, Congress may have demonstrated its intent to exclude felon disenfranchisement statutes from the VRA's purview. See id.
183. See id. at 352–53 (Parker, J., dissenting) (stating that legislative history of one section of expansive statute such as VRA is of no value when attempting to understand other section); Johnson v. Bush, 405 F.3d 1214, 1249 (11th Cir. 2005) (Barkett, J., dissenting) (discussing that decision to not add felon disenfranchisement statutes to list of per se violations does not show intent to exempt these laws from VRA); Nicholas S. Zeppos, Legislative History and the Interpretation of Statutes: Toward a Fact-Finding Model of Statutory
Congress merely declined to characterize these laws as per se violative of the VRA. This decision does not signify that felon disenfranchisement laws can never violate any section of the VRA. Instead, section 2 addresses voting regulations that are not per se invalid under section 4 but nonetheless result in a racially disparate impact on voting rights. Thus, allowing felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 comports with the legislative intent of the VRA.

C. The Proposed Approach Addresses the Second Circuit’s Constitutional Concerns

The Supreme Court must delineate an approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 before addressing the Second Circuit’s constitutional concerns. By adopting the proposed approach, the Court can address these concerns and affirm the VRA’s constitutionality. Because this approach allows courts to alter the scrutiny relative to the burden on voting rights, it assuages the Second Circuit’s fears of unconstitutional consequences.

First, contrary to the Second Circuit’s predictions, the VRA will remain a valid use of Congress’s enforcement powers under the Fifteenth Amendment. Specifically, under the proposed approach the VRA will remain a congruent and proportional response to the record of racially discriminatory voting rights legislation. Instead of targeting specific racially biased voting regulations, Congress drafted the VRA as a general prophylactic statute to prevent even unpredicted forms of this evil. As such, providing an exhaustive list of specific state ploys used to restrict minority voting rights was both impossible and illogical.

Interpretation, 76 VA. L. REV. 1295, 1300–01 (1990) (presenting textualist argument that even legislative history of statute is not accurate indicator of intent for same statute).

184. See Hayden, 449 F.3d at 364–66 (Calabresi, J., dissenting) (stating that although felon disenfranchisement statutes are not per se invalid under section 4, issue is if they violate section 2 when having discriminatory effect); Johnson, 405 F.3d at 1249 (Barkett, J., dissenting) (stating that decision to not invalidate all felon disenfranchisement laws under section 4 does not mean that these laws are free from any attacks).


186. See supra Part II,B (discussing the Second Circuit’s constitutional concerns); supra pp. 36–40 (discussing the need to adopt an approach to vote denial claims under section 2 before addressing these concerns).

187. See supra Part III.A.2 (discussing the court’s ability to adjust the level of scrutiny).


189. See Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 361–62 (2d Cir. 2006) (Parker, J., dissenting) (discussing historical struggle between federal government and creatively oppressive state legislatures, and need for VRA to be broad and prophylactic).
In the absence of a specific and exhaustive record of discriminatory felon disenfranchisement statutes that the VRA targets, one must consider the VRA's constitutionality relative to the general record and history of discriminatory voting regulations. Because section 2 targets discriminatory ends and not means in order to pre-empt states in their attempts to infringe minority voting rights, the VRA will remain constitutional if it targets only voting restrictions with racially burdensome effects. Such statutes, in whatever form they may take, definitively fall within the purview of the Fifteenth Amendment.

The proposed approach protects the VRA as a valid use of enforcement powers by narrowly focusing the judiciary's power to strike felon disenfranchisement statutes. Much like an anticipatory warrant in criminal procedure jurisprudence, the proposed approach proactively identifies a set of factors that suggest racial bias. Accordingly, should these factors exist, a challenged statute likely falls within the record and history of racially oppressive voting restrictions. However, courts will not have the power to strike statutes until the identified factors are fulfilled. Thus, the proposed approach allows courts to strike racially biased voting restrictions that are within the purview of the Fifteenth Amendment, without forcing Congress to update constantly its specific record of racially discriminatory voting regulations. Requiring Congress to do so would cause significant delay in invalidating racially restrictive voting statutes, and give state legislatures a substantial head start in the formidable cat and mouse game.

Second, the proposed approach prevents section 2 from impermissibly altering the balance between the federal and state governments, as the Second Circuit surmises. Under the United States system of federalism, states are largely sovereign and enjoy significant power to regulate elections. However, numerous Amendments show that this power is...
not entirely free from federal control. For example, the Fifteenth Amendment restrains states from denying citizens the right to vote based on their race, thus altering the federal-state balance of powers. The VRA, which Congress passed to enforce this amendment, merely enforces this legitimate federal constraint. If the application of section 2 to felon disenfranchisement laws corresponds with the Fifteenth Amendment’s purpose, the VRA will not further alter the federal-state balance.

The approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 will determine if the VRA impermissibly exaggerates the Fifteenth Amendment’s alteration of federal-state powers. Allowing courts to strike statutes that are racially neutral both facially and in application would significantly increase this alteration. However, the proposed approach avoids this result by allowing courts to target only felon disenfranchisement laws that impose a substantial burden on minorities’ voting rights. This quality would thus allow courts to avoid impermissibly altering the federal-state balance by enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment in a way that is consistent with that Amendment’s protection of minority voting rights.

However, those opposed to allowing felon disenfranchisement challenges might argue that the Fourteenth Amendment affirms a state’s power to disenfranchise citizens who commit felonies. Echoing the

195. See supra Part I.A (discussing judicial voting rights protection); see also U.S. Const. amend. XV. However, this does not signify that all laws passed under Congress’s enforcement powers will not unconstitutionally alter the federal-state balance. See, e.g., Fla. Prepaid Postsecondary Educ. Expense Bd. v. Coll. Sav Bank, 527 U.S. 627, 647 (1999) (holding that Congress violated enforcement power by abrogating states’ sovereign immunity using Section 5 of Fourteenth Amendment). See generally Donald Francis Donovan, Toward Limits on Congressional Enforcement Power Under the Civil War Amendments, 34 Stan. L. Rev. 453 (1982) (discussing history of enforcement power doctrine and limitations to powers with thorough case law analysis).


197. See discussion of the mechanics of the proposed approach supra Part III.A.

198. The purpose of the Fifteenth Amendment was to guarantee that African American voting rights were both national and permanent. See Gabriel J. Chin, Reconstruction, Felon Disenfranchisement, and the Right to Vote: Did the Fifteenth Amendment Repeal Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment?, 92 Geo. L.J. 259, 272 (2004) (discussing legislative intent of Fifteenth Amendment).

199. See discussion of this concern supra pp. 29–30.

200. See Richardson v. Ramirez, 418 U.S. 24, 41–42, 54 (1974) (finding affirmative authorization for felon disenfranchisement statutes in Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment); Hayden v. Pataki, 449 F.3d 305, 316 (discussing approval for felon disenfran-
Second Circuit’s stance, some argue that Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment authorizes these laws by withholding punishment when states disenfranchise felons. Accordingly, this argument suggests that if courts strike any felon disenfranchisement laws under the VRA, the Act impermissibly alters the federal-state balance.

This argument is flawed, however, because the Fourteenth Amendment does not grant states an unconditional power to disenfranchise felons. Instead, Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment allows states to disenfranchise felons without federal punishment only when doing so is legally valid. However, when felon disenfranchisement laws disproportionately affect minorities’ voting rights, the VRA provides that these statutes are not legally valid. Accordingly, courts applying the VRA to felon disenfranchisement challenges should only strike statutes that are not within the Fourteenth Amendment’s limited authorization for these laws.
The proposed approach enables courts to distinguish the legally valid laws from the impermissible laws by focusing on the burden imposed on minority voting rights. This distinction enables section 2 of the VRA to parallel the Fourteenth Amendment's minority rights protection, while respecting that Amendment's limited authorization for felon disenfranchisement. Thus, allowing courts to strike specific felon disenfranchisement statutes under the VRA would neither conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment, nor unconstitutionally alter the federal-state balance.

D. The Proposed Approach Allows Use of the VRA as the Only Plausible Avenue for Redress

Adopting the proposed approach to felon disenfranchisement statutes under section 2 of the VRA will re-open the courthouse doors to disenfranchised minorities seeking judicial redress. It is a fundamental function of the judiciary to afford citizens the ability to challenge laws that violate their rights. As the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals acknowledged in Farrakhan, even ex-felons have the right to challenge racially discriminatory voting regulations. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court's use of rational basis review for felon disenfranchisement challenges under the Fourteenth Amendment has precluded felons from effectively challenging felon disenfranchisement laws. However, section 2 of the VRA may provide felons with an

208. See discussion of the mechanics of the proposed approach supra Part III.A.
209. For a discussion of the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment and racial considerations, see Foner, supra note 206, at 251-61.
210. See supra notes 195-202 and accompanying text (discussing proposed approach's effect on federal-state balance of powers); supra notes 206-211 and accompanying text (describing section 2's compatibility with Fourteenth Amendment if applied to felon disenfranchisement laws).
211. See discussion of Richardson v. Ramirez, which held that Constitution expressly allows felon disenfranchisement laws supra Part I.C.2.
212. See Marbury v. Madison, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 162-63 (1803) (declaring that very essence of civil liberty is to afford every plaintiff remedy for violation of rights); The Federalist No. 78 (Alexander Hamilton) (describing function of judicial branch as essential safeguard against ill humors of society, including protecting private rights of citizens against unjust and partial laws); The Federalist No. 80 (Alexander Hamilton) (opining that spirit behind fraudulent state laws will survive constitutional safeguards, and that federal judiciary must have control over state practices); see also Taxier v. Sweet, 2 Dall. 81, 82 (Pa. 1766) (stating that if plaintiffs were without remedy at law, court would provide some remedy to redress plaintiffs' injury).
213. Farrakhan v. Washington, 338 F.3d 1009, 1016 (9th Cir. 2003) (stating that permitting even a convicted felon to challenge felon disenfranchisement laws enforces right that every citizen has to challenge racially discriminatory voting regulations).
214. See Hunter v. Underwood, 471 U.S. 222, 233 (1985) (holding that strict scrutiny applies to felon disenfranchisement statute when plaintiffs establish invidious intent);
alternative means to challenge felon disenfranchisement laws, but the Court must first develop an effective approach to these claims that protects the VRA's constitutionality. The Court should adopt the proposed approach because it protects the constitutionality of the VRA while providing felons with an effective vehicle to challenge disenfranchisement laws.

CONCLUSION

Despite their opposite conclusions, the Ninth and Second Circuits share a commonality when analyzing challenges to felon disenfranchisement laws under section 2 of the VRA: they both jump to conclusions. These circuits assume that they can foresee the consequences of allowing such challenges, yet disagree about the constitutionality of those consequences. The irony is that both circuits are wrong.

Both the Ninth and Second Circuits overlook that courts do not currently have the analytical tools to consider vote denial challenges under section 2. Accordingly, the constitutional implications of accepting felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2 are unforeseeable. When and if the Supreme Court addresses this split of authority, it must first establish a standard approach to vote denial claims under section 2. Only then can the Court determine the merits of each circuit's rationale.

This Article proposed a variation of sliding scale scrutiny as an effective approach to felon disenfranchisement challenges under section 2. Such an approach allows courts to address felon disenfranchisement challenges uniformly and in a manner consistent with Supreme Court precedent and legislative intent. Furthermore, this approach protects the constitutional validity of the VRA, while affording courts the authority to


216. See supra Part III.C.

217. See supra notes 122-129 and accompanying text.

218. See Tokaji, supra note 7, at 732-33 (stating that while individuals may argue over best approach to section 2 vote denial claims, important thing is for courts to develop some workable standard).

219. See discussion supra Part III.A.

220. See discussion supra Part III.B.
regulate felon disenfranchisement statutes under section 2.\textsuperscript{221} Finally, the proposed approach enables disenfranchised felons to challenge potentially racially discriminatory laws that prevent them from voting.\textsuperscript{222} Under the current application of the law, however, felons may have lost their ability to protect their voting rights because federal courts have jumped to conclusions.

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{221} See discussion \textit{supra} Part III.C.
  \item \textsuperscript{222} See discussion \textit{supra} Part III.D.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}