



Language Access & State Voting Rights Acts

A Case Study of the Connecticut VRA

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About Dēmos

Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy and economy. We work hand in hand to build power with and for Black and brown communities, forging strategic alliances with grassroots and state-based organizations.

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Introduction

Effective language access is essential for ensuring that every voter can fully participate in our democracy. Since 1975, language access has been a key element of the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA).

The federal VRA has made voting accessible to Americans whose primary language is not English by requiring translated ballots, interpreter services, and other forms of language assistance—and this assistance has often led to higher levels of voter registration and voter turnout.

But the federal VRA does not guarantee language access to everyone. Thousands of limited-English-proficient (LEP) voters fall outside of the federal VRA's reach—due to strict population thresholds and national origin exclusions—and thus may receive no language assistance at all. Many state and local governments have enacted their own language access policies to fill these gaps, including, in recent years, state-level voting rights acts. The most far-reaching of recently enacted state voting rights laws is the Connecticut VRA (CTVRA).

The CTVRA, enacted in 2023,¹ has some of the broadest state-level protections for LEP voters in the nation. It has dramatically improved language access for Connecticut voters by increasing the number of jurisdictions that must provide language assistance. In addition, the passage of the CTVRA is a useful case study for expanding language access in other states. In particular, this case study examines how state VRAs can be an effective response to major limitations of the federal VRA, what campaign support may aid the passage of state language access laws, what obstacles may pose a challenge to implementation of a state VRA, and what opportunities there are to further fine-tune language assistance standards and services as new legislation is developed in other states.

The Need for State & Local Language Access Laws

Limitations of Section 203

Section 203 of the VRA provides language assistance to thousands of LEP voters across the country. But the language access guarantees of the federal VRA fail to reach all LEP voters. Instead, they apply only to “language minorities,” whom the law narrowly defines as voters who are Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, American Indian, or Alaska Native.² LEP voters whose primary language falls outside the formal definition are not covered by Section 203, meaning states and localities have no federal obligations to provide language assistance to voters who speak a language that is African, Caribbean, European (other than Spanish), Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, or non-U.S. indigenous.

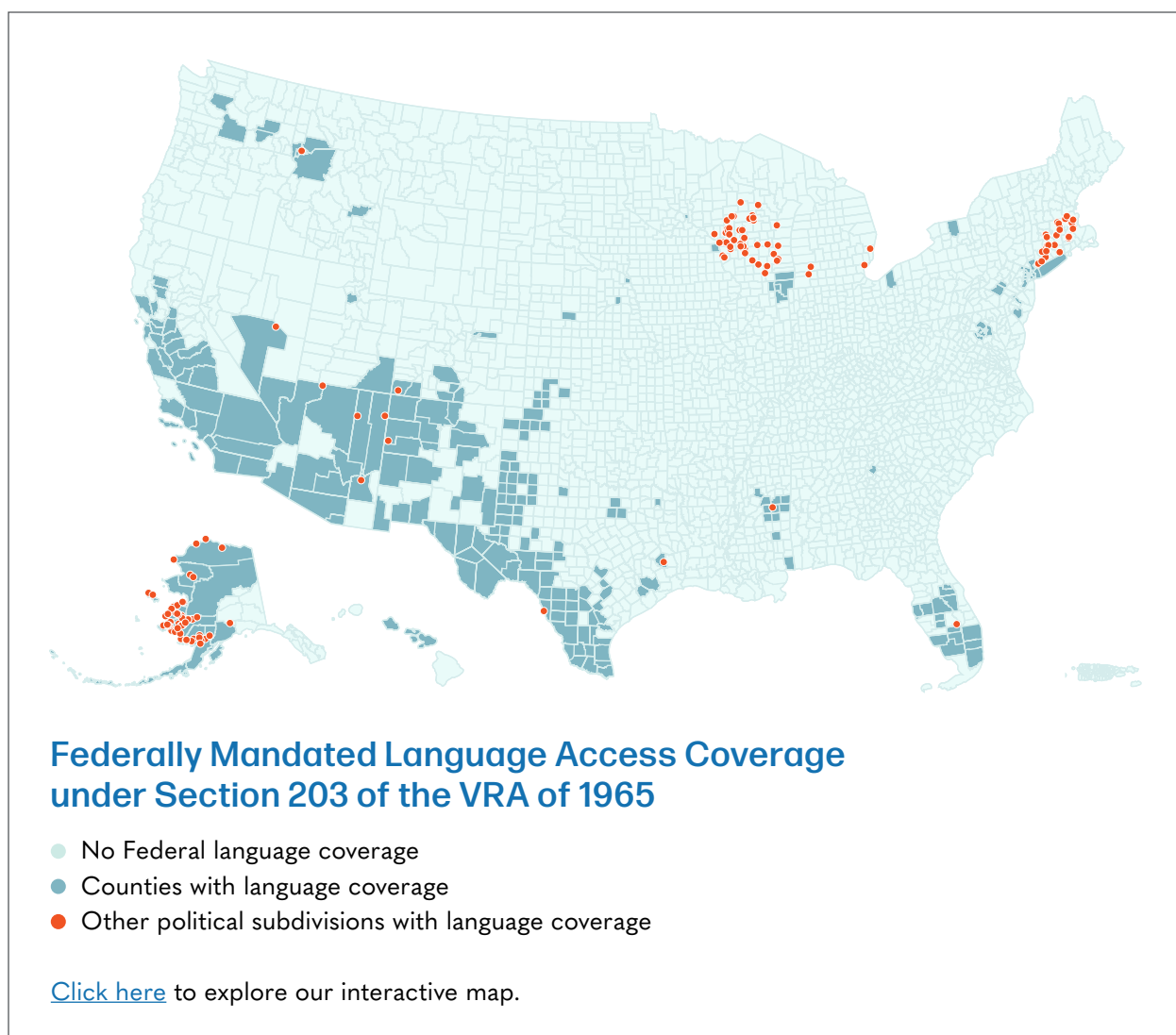
Moreover, Section 203 employs various formulas that rely on a group’s population size to determine coverage for a state or locality. Under the most commonly used formulas, a local such as a city or county can be covered in either of two tests:

1. Percentage-based Benchmark³—Five Percent

For each protected language group, if the number of voting age citizens who are limited-English-proficient is greater than five percent of the voting-age citizen population in a local jurisdiction, and their illiteracy rate is above the national average,⁴ then Section 203 coverage applies for that language group.

2. Population-based Benchmark—10,000 Citizens

For each protected language group, if the number of voting-age citizens who are LEP is greater than 10,000 in a local jurisdiction, and their illiteracy rate is above the national average, then Section 203 coverage applies for that language group.



Entire states can also be covered if the five percent benchmark is met statewide. In addition, special requirements apply to indigenous populations whose communities may overlap two or more municipal geographies, so that all jurisdictions that contain part of the tribal land are covered; however, the percent-based benchmark is also five percent.⁵

Failing to satisfy these benchmarks means that no language assistance is required, even if populations are sizable but fall just short of five percent or 10,000. Because census determinations are made every five years (most recently in 2021), populations may eventually gain federal VRA coverage, but it is also possible to lose coverage through decreases in relative population that drop a group's percentage below five percent, or through the net loss of voting-age citizens to below 10,000.

Evolution of State VRAs to Address Gaps in Federal Law

To address the shortcomings of Section 203, many state and local governments have enacted their own language access policies, typically by expanding the covered groups beyond the federal definition or by extending coverage to voters whose numbers fall short of satisfying federal VRA formulas. Many jurisdictions with large immigrant populations have focused on specific languages, including languages not covered under Section 203. For instance, Haitian Creole translations have been available in Miami-Dade County, Florida, for decades,⁶ while Arabic ballots are available in the Detroit-area cities of Dearborn and Hamtramck.⁷

Other approaches do not target specific languages but employ definitions and benchmarks that differ from the ones in the federal VRA. For example, in California, state law requires county elections officials to provide sample ballots and related instructions in precincts where three percent or more of the voting-age residents (not just citizens) are members of a single language minority and lack sufficient skills in English to vote without assistance.⁸

The enactment of state VRAs has become more common in recent years because of attempts to address serious problems with the federal VRA. State VRAs address not just language assistance but also key components of the federal VRA, such as litigation standards and preclearance systems, that have been weakened or rendered ineffective by court decisions and that have not been addressed by Congress.⁹ For example, the Virginia Voting Rights Act, enacted in 2021, builds on federal law by, among other things, creating a state-level system of review when local jurisdictions want to make certain changes to election practices and applying language assistance requirements to all local elections.¹⁰ However, Virginia's law replicates the federal definition of language minorities and does not lower numerical benchmarks below the federal levels.

State VRAs address not just language assistance but also key components of the federal VRA, such as litigation standards and preclearance systems, that have been weakened or rendered ineffective by court decisions and that have not been addressed by Congress.

On the other hand, the New York Voting Rights Act (NYVRA), enacted in 2022,¹¹ lowers the percentage-based benchmark from five percent to two percent, although there must also be at least 300 targeted voting-age citizens in the jurisdiction.¹²

Similarly, the absolute-number benchmark in the NYVRA is 4,000, compared to 10,000 in the federal law. However, the NYVRA also does not expand the definition of language minority and simply mirrors the federal law in limiting coverage to Asian American, Latino, and Native American populations.

The Connecticut Voting Rights Act & the Cutting Edge of Language Access

The Connecticut VRA offers a more robust model by lowering numerical thresholds and extending coverage to groups excluded under the federal definition of language minority. The CTVRA's numerical benchmarks parallel those contained in the NYVRA: A 4,000 absolute-number test, as well as a percent-test of two percent. But unlike the NYVRA, the CTVRA does not require an explicit minimum of LEP adult citizens for coverage. Moreover, coverage is untethered from any need to document or remedy past discrimination against specified groups, a critical difference from the federal VRA. Instead, the CTVRA extends

coverage to municipalities in which voting-age citizens “speak a particular shared language other than English and are limited English proficient individuals.”¹³ And, even if the formal numerical benchmarks are not satisfied, the secretary of state has the discretion through regulations and a review process to determine whether there is a “significant and substantial need” for a municipality to add a designated language for assistance.¹⁴

The Connecticut VRA offers a more robust model by lowering numerical thresholds and extending coverage to groups excluded under the federal definition of language minority.



The CTVRA also has a strong set of mandates once language assistance has been triggered. Covered municipalities must provide “competent assistance in each designated language and shall provide related materials: (1) In English and (2) In each designated language, including registration or voting notices, forms, instructions, assistance, ballots or other materials or information relating to the electoral process.”¹⁵ The CTVRA also imposes a strong standard on written translations, requiring that “[a]ll materials provided in a designated language shall be of an equal quality to the corresponding English materials.”¹⁶

Moreover, the CTVRA requires that “[a]ll provided translations shall convey the intent and essential meaning of the original text or communication and shall not rely solely on any automatic translation service” and that “[w]henever available, language assistance shall also include live translation.”¹⁷ The CTVRA also contains a private right of action for covered voters in a municipality, allowing voters to sue in state court to enforce the language assistance provisions.¹⁸

While the CTVRA is not necessarily considered a model bill, it does reflect an evolution in public policies that have relaxed the federal VRA standards and expanded potential coverage to a much wider range of groups.

Expansion of Coverage Under the CTVRA

To better understand how the Connecticut VRA has expanded language access, a comparison between Section 203 coverage and CTVRA coverage is useful.

Although Connecticut has a few historic counties, it does not have county-level government; instead, the state has 169 municipalities made up of towns, cities, and a borough. Historically, Section 203 coverage has been applied to several of Connecticut's towns: in 2002, seven Connecticut towns were covered for Spanish; in 2011, nine towns were covered for Spanish; in 2016, nine towns were covered for Spanish and one town for a Native American language; in 2021, 10 towns were covered for Spanish.¹⁹ The Connecticut towns covered by Section 203 for Spanish in 2021 were Bridgeport, East Hartford, Hartford, Meriden, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Norwalk, Waterbury, and Windham.²⁰

In addition, the Connecticut towns of Danbury and Stamford just missed coverage for Spanish in the 2021 census determinations.²¹ Danbury fell just below the federal VRA's five percent benchmark with a 4.5 percent eligible population; Stamford was even closer to the benchmark with a 4.9 percent eligible population.

The CTVRA defines "municipalities" to include towns, cities, boroughs, and local or regional school districts,²² and the Connecticut secretary of state is empowered to make

Historical Coverage in Connecticut Towns

2002	↓	7	Covered Spanish
2011	↓	9	Covered Spanish
2016	↓	9	Covered Spanish
		1	Covered a Native American Language
2021	↓	10	Covered Spanish

annual determinations that designate one or more languages for coverage if there is a finding of a “significant and substantial need” for language assistance.²³ Both census data and state or municipal data can be employed to make these determinations.

Under the CTVRA, all 10 towns covered for Spanish by Section 203 are also covered by the state-level mandates. Under the most recent determinations by the Connecticut secretary of state, 23 additional municipalities, including boroughs and school districts, must provide language assistance in Spanish.²⁴ The municipalities include the Section 203 just-missed towns of Danbury and Stamford.

Table 1. Connecticut Jurisdictions Covered by Federal and State Language Assistance Laws

Jurisdiction	Covered Under VRA Section 203 (as of 2021)	Just-Missed VRA Section 203 (as of 2021)	Covered Under CTVRA (as of 2025)
Ansonia			✓
Borough of Danielson			✓
Bridgeport	✓		✓
Bristol			✓
Chaplin			✓
Danbury		✗	✓
Derby			✓
East Hartford	✓		✓
Greenwich			✓
Hartford	✓		✓
Killingly			✓
Manchester			✓
Meriden	✓		✓
Montville			✓
New Britain	✓		✓

Jurisdiction	Covered Under VRA Section 203 (as of 2021)	Just-Missed VRA Section 203 (as of 2021)	Covered Under CTVRA (as of 2025)
New Haven	✓		✓
New London	✓		✓
Norwalk	✓		✓
Norwich			✓
Oxford			✓
Regional School Dist. 11			✓
Sherman			✓
Somers			✓
Stamford		✗	✓
Sterling			✓
Vernon			✓
Voluntown			✓
Waterbury	✓		✓
West Hartford			✓
West Haven			✓
Westbrook			✓
Windham	✓		✓
Woodstock			✓

As of this writing, no languages other than Spanish have satisfied the CTVRA benchmarks, including in the town of Kent, which was previously covered by Section 203 for the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation. Nonetheless, municipalities with growing Latino and Caribbean populations, as well as with sizable Asian American populations (including Asian Indian and Chinese LEP communities in some of the larger towns), all have the potential to gain coverage over time.

Legislative & Advocacy History of the CTVRA²⁵

The enactment of the Connecticut Voting Rights Act in 2023 was the culmination of a robust and highly active period of legislative advocacy, one that built on the recent passage of state VRAs in other states and drew on national, state, and local advocacy coalitions.

The CTVRA was also structured as an omnibus voting rights package that spanned several areas, not merely language assistance. Because of the breadth of the coalitions, advocacy occurred on multiple fronts: Some groups focused largely on language assistance, but more supporters focused on the overall package or on other specific provisions of the legislation. What is clear is that the confluence of consistent legislative support, a wide range of engaged advocates, and momentum from recent enactments of other state VRAs—as well as the non-movement in Congress of fixes for the federal VRA—helped lead to the passage of the CTVRA.

The CTVRA Passed with Wide Legislative Support

The ultimate signing of House Bill 6941 by Governor Ned Lamont (D) in June of 2023 reflected both bipartisan support and some legislative twists and turns. The state itself has had a long and unfortunate history of compromising voting rights. For instance, Connecticut was the first state in the nation to require literacy tests, which were ultimately banned by the federal Voting Rights Act.²⁶ In recent years, more progressive elections bills have been passed by the Connecticut legislature, but previous attempts to pass comprehensive state voting rights legislation died without full votes in both the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 sessions.²⁷

The evolution of the CTVRA over the course of three legislative sessions reflects important growth in both public policy and coalition building. The language access provisions were expanded significantly from the earliest version of the legislation. For instance, Senate Bill 820, which was introduced in 2021 by Senator Matthew Lesser (D), contained language that paralleled the New York Voting Rights Act and relied upon the more constrained definition of “language minority” contained in the federal VRA.²⁸ Later iterations of the CTVRA legislation contained no limiting definition for language groups, which enabled additional languages, including those rooted in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, to fall within the scope of coverage.

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In the 2023 legislative session, Senate Bill 1226, which contained much of the same language as the bill that had stalled the previous year, was introduced.²⁹ At a January 2023 press conference of legislators and advocates in Hartford, statements by Senator Lesser, who is credited with introducing the idea of a Connecticut VRA, emphasized the necessity of S.B. 1226 and its origins in the civil rights community.³⁰ At the same gathering, Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas also voiced her support: “Every eligible voter deserves an equal opportunity to have their vote counted, no matter their zip code, what their first language is, physical ability and so on.”³¹

Representative Matt Blumenthal (D) and Senator Mae Flexer (D), chairs of their respective committees on Government Administration and Elections, are credited with having been important champions of the CTVRA as it moved through its stages of review.³² A wide range of additional legislators, including members of the Connecticut Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, also lent their support to S.B. 1226. Opponents included conservative lawmakers who opposed the anti-discrimination legislation for being overly attentive to race and for granting excessive powers to the secretary of state and to state courts.³³ After passing in the state Senate by a 27-9 vote in late May 2023,³⁴ the core Connecticut VRA bill was ultimately folded into House Bill 6941, an omnibus budget bill that passed on June 6, 2023, by a 139-12 vote in the Connecticut House and by a 35-1 vote in the Senate.³⁵ Governor Lamont signed the bill on June 12, 2023.

“Democracy cannot work if we continue to allow these discriminatory practices to stand in the way of voters seeking to exercise their constitutional right.”

Fulvia Vargas-de Leon,
LatinoJustice

Broad Base of Local, State, & National Advocates

Advocacy across several levels was essential to support passage of the CTVRA. National organizations such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) have long played a key role in winning passage of state voting rights legislation, and advocacy from Connecticut-based organizations was just as central in the CTVRA’s passage. Important state advocates included the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-Connecticut), Common Cause Connecticut, the League of Women Voters of Connecticut, the

Full Citizens Coalition, as well as various local chapters of the NAACP and the Urban League. ACLU-Connecticut helped coordinate local media work and mobilized a wide range of groups. One coalition letter supporting the CTVRA from state and regional organizations featured nearly 70 signatories.³⁶ Support from state and local experts on Connecticut election law and procedures was also critical, particularly in developing draft language and creating appropriate metrics for language access and other key provisions of the CTVRA.³⁷

Immigrant rights organizations, such as the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) and LatinoJustice/Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, were central to advocacy specific to language assistance. AALDEF and LatinoJustice, both based in New York City, have focused on monitoring and litigating language access issues for years and were active in reviewing legislative language and generating testimony focused on the CTVRA’s language access provisions. For instance, at a 2023 meeting with Connecticut legislators and the Secretary of State, Fulvia Vargas-de Leon, a former attorney with LatinoJustice, stated: “The bill is already late when we consider how many elections in the state have been encumbered by voting practices that severely limit who can truly participate in our democracy.”³⁸ She added, “Democracy cannot work if we continue to allow these discriminatory practices to stand in the way of voters seeking to exercise their constitutional right.” At the same convening, Yanidsi Velez, the former

New England Regional Director of the Hispanic Federation, stated: “To truly chip away at the systemic barriers, we need legislation that will protect our right to vote by combating discrimination and expanding cultural[ly] competent outreach.”³⁹

Multiple organizations were also key in sponsoring information sessions, which were held over the course of several months in the spring of 2023 in Hartford, Stamford, and New Haven. The sessions were designed to inform the public about Connecticut’s history of discrimination in voting, the need for state voting rights legislation, and the specific provisions of the CTVRA.⁴⁰ Several dozen residents attended each of the sessions, including many who received information through Spanish-language interpreters. And public support for the CTVRA was clear from survey data from 2023: 75 percent of Connecticut voters supported the CTVRA, while nearly 90 percent of Black voters in Connecticut wanted their state representatives to prioritize the CTVRA.⁴¹

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Finally, national advocates played a critical and ongoing role in centralizing information on voting rights history and needs, drafting legislation, and helping coordinate campaigns across multiple states. LDF has long been instrumental in developing legislative language and leading advocacy across several states, including New York and Connecticut. LDF has also been a leading clearinghouse for state VRA information and has provided important legal assistance, organizing support, and data analyses for state VRAs and the potential impacts of language assistance policies.⁴² In addition, Washington, D.C.-based coalitions such as the Voting Rights Task Force of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights have also helped mobilize voting rights advocates from across the country to support state VRAs. Work on the Connecticut VRA paralleled national efforts in earlier support of the New York VRA and similar legislation.

Opposition and Challenges to the CTVRA

Unsurprisingly, attempts to block voting rights legislation often come from conservative lawmakers, who oppose the explicit use of race and ethnicity in state VRAs.⁴³ In response to the 2021 Connecticut VRA bill, Representative Gale Mastrofrancesco stated: “In my opinion, this is all wrong... We’re trying to tell people that you must vote, you know, we’re going to divide this up to ensure that you vote for a certain person based on their race.”⁴⁴

Opposition to language-assistance legislation can also come from local elections officials, who are concerned about unfunded mandates from the federal government or the state legislature that will require significant investments of local staff and resources.⁴⁵ Local officials often propose that providing assistance in even a single language can open the floodgates to wider mandates, even though both the federal VRA and state VRAs are designed (through numerical benchmarks) to limit coverage.⁴⁶ In Connecticut, the local clerks’ association did not offer vocal opposition to the CTVRA.⁴⁷

Despite success in enacting the CTVRA in 2023, a lingering problem in its implementation has focused on adequate funding for its many provisions. The state’s biennial budget bill became a key hurdle to overcome in 2025, and additional advocacy to obtain full funding for the CTVRA—including core staffing in the secretary of state’s office for general enforcement, preclearance, language assistance, and the elections database—became necessary. For example, the League of Women Voters of Connecticut issued a call to action in May 2025, explaining that full implementation of the CTVRA would require \$988,438 each year to cover five staff positions for carrying out preclearance provisions and other aspects of the law; maintenance of the statewide election database; and translation services to comply with language access requirements.⁴⁸ It was not until June 30, 2025, that Governor Lamont signed the biennial budget bill, with full funding for the secretary of state’s office to implement the CTVRA.⁴⁹

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Connecticut VRA Legislative Timeline

2021	February 3	SB 820 Introduced
	April 5	SB 820 Voted Favorably—Senate Elections Committee VOTE: 13-6
	April 22	SB 820 Dies in Senate Chamber
2022	March 18	SB 471 Introduced as Committee Bill
	March 21	Public Hearing on SB 471
	March 29	SB 471 Voted Favorably—Senate Elections Committee VOTE: 12-5 (2 ABSTAIN)
	April 7	SB 471 Referred for Fiscal Analysis
	April 13	SB 471 Reported Favorably
	April 13	SB 471 Calendared in Senate Chamber
	April 21	Legislators/Civil Rights Coalition Joint Press Conference on SB471
	April 2022	SB 471 Dies in Senate Chamber
	June 20	New York Voting Rights Act Enacted

Connecticut VRA Legislative Timeline (continued)

2023	January	SB 1226 Introduced
	January 31	Legislator/Secretary of State/Advocate Joint Press Conference
	February–April	Information Sessions for Public Sponsored by Multiple Advocates
	March 16	Public Hearing on SB 1226
	March 27	SB 1226 Voted Favorably—Senate Elections Committee VOTE: 12-6 (1 ABSTAIN)
	April 10	SB 1226 Referred for Fiscal Analysis
	May 15	Connecticut Coalition Letter Submitted
	May 15	SB 1226 Voted Favorably—Senate Appropriations Committee VOTE: 37-16
	May 23	SB 1226 Voted Favorably—Senate Judiciary Committee VOTE: 35-1 (1 ABSTAIN)
	May 25	SB 1226 Passes Senate VOTE: 27-9
	June	SB 1226 Consolidated with HB 6941 (Budget Bill)
	June 6	HB 6941 Passes House VOTE: 139-12
	June 6	HB 6971 Passes Senate VOTE: 35-1
↓		
June 12 Governor Lamont Signs HB 6971 – CTVRA Enacted		
2025	May–June	Advocacy to Enact Budget Legislation Supporting CTVRA
	June 30	Budget Bill Signed by Governor Lamont— \$988,438 annual allocation for CTVRA

Opportunities & Lessons

At the present time, the Connecticut Voting Rights Act is among the strongest state voting rights laws in the country, and its language assistance provisions are a marked improvement over the federal VRA.

In the face of years of congressional inaction to address the shortcomings of Section 203, the CTVRA's cutting-edge language assistance provisions can serve as a guide for expanding language access to voters in other states across the country. Below are some lessons that can be drawn from the historical passage of CTVRA.

Expand the Aims of Language Access

The Connecticut VRA, unlike the federal VRA, does not couple remedying discrimination against historically excluded groups with its language assistance policies. This decoupling is essential to focus on broader LEP needs, which are related but still distinct from the racial and ethnic discrimination that groups such as Latino, Asian American, and Native American communities continue to face in education and the political process. Congress has more limited powers under the federal Constitution to impose mandates on state and local government without a remedial basis, but these restrictions do not bind state governments such as Connecticut's in the same way. The CTVRA takes advantage of this less restricted authority to enact broad language assistance provisions, including by extending coverage to communities that are excluded from protections under the federal VRA.

Consider Tiered Language Assistance Provisions for Smaller Language Communities

Connecticut has also opted to use lower thresholds to determine coverage for its municipalities. These percentages and numerical triggers clearly expand the number of communities required to provide language assistance. However, at present, only Spanish-language coverage is available in Connecticut municipalities, even though there are sizable Asian, African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Native American communities in many of the towns within the state. These populations may ultimately grow to reach coverage, but until then, they lack any systematic assistance.

Municipalities that fall just short of the CTVRA's mathematical triggers (i.e., just-missed jurisdictions) are not required to provide any language assistance at all, as is the case with just-missed jurisdictions under the federal VRA. There are no gradations in coverage that could be employed to assist smaller LEP populations through less extensive forms of assistance, such as the provision of more limited, but still accurate, translated election materials. Legislation that explores tiered coverage across two or more benchmarks could ultimately lead to broader coverage for these smaller, but growing, populations.

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Build a Broad Coalition of Advocates that Includes Local, State, and National Organizations

The CTVRA relied on coordinated advocacy efforts from local, state, and national organizations. As one powerful example, LDF helped build momentum for the CTVRA by connecting it to other recent state VRA advocacy efforts. By coalescing a broad network of civil and voting rights organizations around the CTVRA, advocates were able to leverage the extensive resources and institutional knowledge of large national organizations while, at the same time, ensuring that the campaign was anchored by Connecticut-based groups. In the same vein, drawing on immigrant rights organizations to shape the language assistance provisions of the CTVRA helped ensure that language access was not given short shrift amid a comprehensive voting rights bill.

Ensure Impacted Communities are at the Center of Advocacy Efforts Community input, including from LEP voters, early and often is important for ensuring that language assistance provisions meet the needs of those they are designed to support. Lawmakers and large policy organizations often play leading roles in drafting legislation, so they should build in steps for consulting directly impacted communities throughout the entire process. This is especially important because secretaries of state are typically statutorily vested

with exclusive powers to make language assistance determinations, with little to no directives to seek input from the affected communities and voters. Informational sessions to educate the public, including ones offering Spanish-language interpretation, demonstrate reasonable efforts by advocates to engage communities on the CTVRA. However, as one advocate reflected, a longer timeline for investing in community involvement, while not guaranteeing immediate legislative success, can ultimately create stronger and more durable solutions.⁵⁰

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Take Steps to Get Ahead of Budget-Related Obstacles to Passage or Implementation

As was the case with the CTVRA, funding is a common obstacle to the passage or implementation of language access policies and other voting rights bills. Fortunately, local elections officials did not publicly oppose the CTVRA. But given the prevalence of opposition from local elections officials to bills that make election administration more expensive and burdensome, language access advocates should proactively build support with local elections officials as part of their campaign strategy. The CTVRA, once enacted, did face obstacles with fully funding its provisions for implementation, which then required additional advocacy with key elected officials. Therefore, in addition to engaging with state lawmakers on the substance of a state VRA, advocates should also participate in the state budget process.



Conclusion

The Connecticut Voting Rights Act has become an exemplar of state-level voting rights legislation, and its language assistance provisions have helped empower thousands of LEP voters across the state.

As other states move forward with their legislation to address the shortcomings of the federal VRA, they can draw on the CTVRA as an example of a successful advocacy process, as well as a public policy that goes well beyond the remedial goals of the federal voting rights laws to address significant and growing language needs within local communities.

Endnotes

- 1 Connecticut General Statutes §§ 9-368l et seq.
- 2 52 U.S.C. § 10310(c)(3).
- 3 52 U.S.C. § 10503(b)(2).
- 4 Addressing illiteracy is an essential element of Section 203's goal of remedying educational discrimination that has spillover effects in voting and the political process.
- 5 52 U.S.C. § 10503(b)(2)(A)(i)(III).
- 6 See JoNel Newman, "Ensuring that Florida's Language Minorities Have Access to the Ballot," 36 Stetson Law Review 329-364 (2007), <https://stetsonlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/36.2.02.Newman.pdf>.
- 7 Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "Why Arabic ballots are now being offered in Michigan and what this means for voter access in the U.S.," PBS News (Nov. 4, 2022), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/with-ballots-in-arabic-how-one-community-is-voting-with-dignity-in-michigan>.
- 8 California Elections Code § 14201.
- 9 For example, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013), nullified the coverage formula for the federal VRA's preclearance system, which requires covered jurisdictions to obtain approval from the federal government before imposing any changes in a local election system. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would amend the VRA to overturn several adverse court decisions, has been introduced in Congress over several years but has eluded passage.
- 10 Virginia Code §§ 24.2-125 et seq.
- 11 New York Election Law §§ 17-200 et seq.
- 12 The NYVRA's percentage test also imposes a minimum-number requirement to balance benefits and costs and to limit coverage of lower populated areas.
- 13 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(b)(1).
- 14 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(f).
- 15 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(e).
- 16 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(g).
- 19 Historical data for the 2002–2021 determinations, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/voting-rights/voting-rights-determination-file.2021.html#list-tab-1337476220>.
- 20 See Table 1.

- 21 Asian Americans Advancing Justice—AAJC, “Jurisdictions and Languages that Just Missed Coverage in 2021 Section 203 Determinations,” <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/sites/default/files/Just%20Missed%202023%20jurisdictions%202021%20determinations%20UPDATED.pdf>.
- 22 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368i(7).
- 23 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l.
- 24 See Table 1. CTVRA eligible language group determinations may also be found at <https://portal.ct.gov/sots/election-services/voting-rights-act/voting-rights-act>.
- 25 Dēmos staff interviewed several advocates who worked on passage of the CTVRA to provides insights into the advocacy process related to language access. These advocates included Patrick Stegemoeller of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Jess Zaccagnino of the ACLU of Connecticut, and Isabelle Muhlbauer and Anita Teekah of LatinoJustice PRLDEF.
- 26 Steve Thornton, “Literacy Tests and the Right to Vote,” [ConnecticutHistory.org](https://connecticuthistory.org) (Sept. 15, 2022), <https://connecticuthistory.org/literacy-tests-and-the-right-to-vote/>.
- 27 See legislative history of Connecticut Senate Bill 820 (2021), <https://legiscan.com/CT/bill/SB00820/2021>; legislative history of Connecticut Senate Bill 471 (2022), <https://legiscan.com/CT/bill/SB00471/2022>.
- 28 See text of Connecticut Senate Bill 820 (2021), <https://legiscan.com/CT/bill/SB00820/2021>.
- 29 See text of Senate Bill 1226 (2023), <https://legiscan.com/CT/bill/SB01226/2023>.
- 30 Jaden Edison, “Advocates and lawmakers make push for state-level voters’ rights act,” *CT Mirror* (Jan. 31, 2023) (“Sen. Matt Lesser, D-Middletown, was credited at the gathering with introducing the concept of the state voting rights act to the legislature, an idea he said sprung from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. He called voting access ‘an important issue’ ... and told attendees that providing equal access to the ballot box for all state residents ‘makes sense.’”), <https://ctmirror.org/2023/01/31/ct-voting-rights-act-legislation-2023-session/>.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Interview with Steven Lance (Former Staff, NAACP Legal Defense Fund), Aug. 25, 2025.
- 33 Jaden Edison, “After long debate, CT Senate advances state voting rights act,” May 26, 2023, <https://ctmirror.org/2023/05/26/after-long-debate-ct-senate-advances-state-voting-rights-act/>.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 <https://legiscan.com/CT/votes/HB06941/2023>
- 36 Letter to Senator Cathy Osten and Representative Toni E. Walker re: Support for the Connecticut Voting Rights Act (S.B. 1226), (May 15, 2023), <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/SB-1226-CT-VRA-Organizational-Letter-of-Support-5-15-23.docx.pdf>.
- 37 Interview with Steven Lance (Former Staff, NAACP Legal Defense Fund), Aug. 25, 2025.
- 38 Jaden Edison, “Advocates and lawmakers make push for state-level voters’ rights act,” *CT Mirror* (Jan. 31, 2023), <https://ctmirror.org/2023/01/31/ct-voting-rights-act-legislation-2023-session/>.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Interview with Jess Zaccagnino, ACLU of Connecticut, Aug. 21, 2025.
- 41 NAACP Legal Defense Fund, “Connecticut Voters Want Their Legislators to Prioritize the CTVRA” (Memo to Interested Parties) (May 2, 2023), <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/CTVRA-Polling-Memo-5-2-23.pdf>.

- 42 NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "State Voting Rights Acts: Protecting Access to the Ballot Box State by State," <https://www.naacpldf.org/state-voting-rights-protect-democracy/>. National organizations can be particularly helpful in data analysis to determine the scope of coverage under a state or local language access policy. Advocates have noted that there may be serious limitations in resources among local and regional organizations to conduct studies to determine optimal coverage formulas. (From an interview with Patrick Stegemoeller, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, June 26, 2025.)
- 43 Mark Pazniokas, "A partisan divide over a Connecticut voters' rights act." *CT Mirror* (Apr. 5, 2021; updated Mar. 5, 2022), <https://ctmirror.org/2021/04/05/a-partisan-divide-over-a-connecticut-voters-rights-act/>.
- 44 Jaden Edison, op. cit. <https://ctmirror.org/2023/05/26/after-long-debate-ct-senate-advances-state-voting-rights-act/>
- 45 For example, local clerks in California expressed significant concerns with legislation (Assembly Bill 884) that would have greatly expanded the number of languages covered under state law. Elaine Alfaro, "Gov. Newsom vetoes bill that would have provided ballots in more languages," KPBS, (Sept. 24, 2024), <https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2024/09/25/governor-vetoes-bill-that-would-have-provided-ballots-in-more-languages>. California Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed the legislation, stating: "While I support the author's goal of expanding language access and resources in our elections, this bill would create new, ongoing general fund cost pressures in the tens of millions of dollars...." Letter from Governor Gavin Newsom to the Members of the California State Assembly re: Assembly Bill 884 (Sept. 22, 2024), <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AB-884-Veto-Message.pdf>.
- 46 For example, in 2024, when legislation to enact a state voting rights act in Michigan was proposed and debated—but ultimately failed to gain passage—local clerks expressed significant concerns about the costs and potential liabilities that they would face through language access requirements and other state VRA mandates. Hayley Harding, "Michigan Voting Rights Act moves forward despite concerns from local clerks," *Votebeat* (Dec. 4, 2024) <https://www.votebeat.org/michigan/2024/12/04/michigan-voting-rights-act-ballot-language-access-translations-funding/>.
- 47 The Connecticut Town Clerks Association did, however, offer opposition to a follow-up bill to the CTVRA language access provisions that would have increased municipal government participation in the translation process. Lau Guzman, "Bill could change ballot translation requirements for CT towns," *CT Insider*, (Apr. 3, 2024), <https://www.ctinsider.com/recordjournal/article/lep-elections-bill-5309-19375832.php>. Introduced in the 2024 legislative session, House Bill 5309 passed out of committee but died in chamber. See legislative history of Connecticut House Bill 5309 (2021), <https://legiscan.com/CT/bill/HB05309/2024>.
- 48 League of Women Voters of Connecticut, "Take Action: Tell Our Legislators to Fully Fund the Connecticut Voting Rights Act," <https://my.lwv.org/connecticut/action-alert/take-action-tell-our-legislators-fully-fund-connecticut-voting-rights-act>. National organizations were also engaged in advocacy to ensure full funding of the CTVRA. See NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "Testimony Supporting the Full Funding of the Connecticut Voting Rights Act, Early Voting, and No-Excuse Absentee Voting," (Feb. 14, 2025), <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/CTVRA-Approps-Testimony-2-14-25.pdf>.
- 49 NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "LDF and ACLU Commend Connecticut for Fully Funding the Connecticut Voting Rights Act," (July 1, 2025), <https://www.naacpldf.org/press-release/ldf-and-aclu-commend-connecticut-for-fully-funding-the-connecticut-voting-rights-act/>.
- 50 Interview with Isabelle Muhlbauer, LatinoJustice PRLDEF, July 18, 2025 ("We can actually end up with a much better version of what we're trying to do, if the community is involved from the beginning and not after the fact. Not just as a piece of 'let's mobilize certain communities to get the bill passed.' ... Make sure that community is the center of what you're trying to do.")