Q & A with Ami Gandhi, Lead Attorney for the Voting Rights Project
Q: How did you get involved in voting rights?
A: I'm the daughter of immigrants and was the first person in my family to vote in the United States. I was born and raised in Indiana, and when I came to Chicago twelve years ago, I became fascinated by the city’s local politics and concerned about the legacy of corruption. I started out my legal career in commercial litigation at a law firm in 2004, and I moved to the public interest sector in 2009. I served as the legal director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago (AAAJ) and as the executive director of South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI). Outside of work, I serve as board chair of Common Cause Illinois and also serve on the board of ACLU of Illinois.

Q: What motivates you to do this work?
A: As a civil rights lawyer, I led programs on affirmative action, hate crime prevention, and other racial justice issues. And as a voting rights advocate, I've been on the front lines of democracy. I advocated to local election boards as they implemented the first Hindi ballots in the country, led in person exit poll studies, and created initiatives to improve civic engagement of immigrants and communities of color. I've led poll monitoring projects or have myself monitored polls in the field in every election since 2010, and my favorite part is getting to know different neighborhoods in the city. I especially love the energy on Election Day. It makes me feel passionate about expanding voter access for all people in a non-partisan way, regardless of whom they're voting for or what their ideology is.

Q: Hasn’t voting rights become a partisan issue?

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on the left and the right are frustrated with our current election system. In Chicago and in Illinois, we actually see serious issues of corruption, and voter suppression by both parties. In this year’s primary, there were egregious election-related violations including physical threats and violence between candidates and supporters within the same party. Republicans and Democrats have both been guilty of manipulating the voting system and even discriminating for the sake of gaining power.

Q: How does Illinois compare to the rest of the country when it comes to voting rights?

A: In Illinois, we theoretically have excellent tools like election-day voter registration, online voter registration, and ballots in multiple languages. But their implementation has been inconsistent. For example, look at election-day voter registration. Even though election-day registration (EDR) is now part of Illinois law, not all election judges [poll workers] are experienced in implementing it, and not all sites are registering voters efficiently.

Culturally, we still have a long way to go to expand voter access. For example, when there are huge lines and backlogs on Election Day, we hear some media outlets and government leaders suggest that voters are at fault for not registering early or even implying that voters are lazy or procrastinating. In reality, many voters use EDR because they attempted to register correctly ahead of time, but administrative problems prevented them from doing so. Other eligible voters simply do not know how to register or aren’t able to because of work obligations, childcare or elder care responsibilities, health problems, or other issues. We need to do a lot more awareness building across communities so that voter tools function the way they’re supposed to.

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Do you want to help protect voting rights? The Chicago Lawyers’ Committee’s Voting Rights Project is recruiting volunteers to take voters’ calls and to deploy in-person to polling places during the November 8 election and leading up to Election Day. Fill out our
Right now, all eyes are on automatic voter registration. The Illinois legislature passed a bill with bipartisan support, but Governor Rauner has not yet signed it. That's too bad, because it's been successfully implemented in other states and would improve voter participation and election administration in Illinois, especially among disenfranchised communities.

Q: Voting rights cases have been making national headlines recently. Where do you think the U.S. is heading on this issue?
A: When there are undue restrictions on how, where, and when we can vote, our basic ability to elect a candidate of our choice is threatened. Disenfranchised communities have long known this, and I think the recent federal decisions shows that the courts are catching up.

This couldn’t be a more important time for voting rights, but many people are feeling hopeless and disillusioned about our elections. At the same time, we see strides in technology that gives us a glimpse of what our democracy could look like. Voter participation is high in India, for example, including in rural, low-income, and relatively inaccessible areas. India has disenfranchised populations too, but when voter access is moving forward in an inspiring way across the world, we have no excuse to delay voter modernization here in the United States.

Q: How will the Voting Rights Project work to protect voting rights?
A: We will have a strong presence on Election Day with attorneys at the polls and on the Election Protection hotline (866-OUR-VOTE), by partnering with the national Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and local coalition partners. But just as importantly, we will be working proactively with community members and election boards.
late, and it is critical for us to partner with them to solve problems at
the polls. Community input is also essential for voter protection
efforts, and the Voting Rights Project will highlight community
members’ ideas and perspectives in our work.

Voting rights work has meaning only if we partner with communities
to pursue civic empowerment even after Election Day. I’m proud to
work for an organization that makes positive change in partnership
with African American, Latino, Asian American, and other
communities on issues including educational equity, fair housing,
employment, and economic development. Chicago Lawyers’
Committee aims to be strategic about adding value to existing
community work, by serving as a legal resource to the people and
organizations who are the most familiar with their own communities.

Q: How can individuals who want to help get involved?
A: Anyone can sign up here to volunteer with the Voting Rights
Project, and feel free to call us anytime at 312-630-9744. We look
forward to expanding our team of volunteers, and we are open to
your ideas about how to best improve civic engagement in your
neighborhood.

Ami Gandhi lives in the city with her husband and one-year old
son. She can be reached at agandhi@clccrul.org

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THE POWER OF VOICE

ANNUAL BENEFIT
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5:30 – 8:30 PM
THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

Register at tiny.cc/powerofvoice

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