



Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America

Ari Berman

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In this groundbreaking narrative history, Ari Berman charts both the transformation of American democracy under the VRA and the counterrevolution that has sought to limit voting rights, from 1965 to the present day. The act enfranchised millions of Americans and is widely regarded as the crowning achievement of the civil rights movement. And yet, fifty years later, we are still fighting heated battles over race, representation, and political power, with lawmakers devising new strategies to keep minorities out of the voting booth and with the Supreme Court declaring a key part of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional.

Berman brings the struggle over voting rights to life through meticulous archival research, in-depth interviews with major figures in the debate, and incisive on-the-ground reporting. In vivid prose, he takes the reader from the demonstrations of the civil rights era to the halls of Congress to the chambers of the Supreme Court. At this important moment in history, *Give Us the Ballot* provides new insight into one of the most vital political and civil rights issues of our time.

A National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist, Nonfiction

A *New York Times* Notable Book of 2015

A *Washington Post* Notable Nonfiction Book of 2015

A *Boston Globe* Best Book of 2015

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Nonfiction Book of 2015

An NPR Best Book of 2015

Countless books have been written about the civil rights movement, but far less attention has been paid to what happened after the dramatic passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965 and the turbulent forces it unleashed. *Give Us the Ballot* tells this story for the first time.

Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America Details

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America Ari Berman**

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Emily says

Well. This was timely and depressing. Voter suppression is foul and should be repudiated by both parties.

Caroline says

If you weren't already in complete despair after reading *Dark Money*, this should finish the job. Detailed history of Republican actions since the early nineties to restrict voting rights, and the conservative Supreme Court's support for those changes.

The first half of the book is encouraging, as it details the creation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. John Lewis is a central and continuing character. This is one area where LBJ shines, despite first saying the VRA wasn't in the cards right now. The televised beatings from Selma changed national opinion over night. The key was requiring states with a history of discriminatory voter registration to submit changes that affected voting to the Department of Justice for review. The courts later confirmed that it was within the scope of the VRA to extend such review to changes that affected representation, such as carving up black neighborhoods to put sections of them into majority white districts.

The last part of the book highlights cagy recent restrictions in voting rights, such as stringent voter id rules, limiting the number of voting machines in minority precincts, purging voter roles using bad data, etc etc etc. With the VRA gutted by Supreme Court rulings, people have no recourse. LBJ's prediction, cited here, that the VRA would give the south to the Republican party for a generation had too short a horizon.

Berman does a wonderful job of detailing the arc of voting rights, with lots of real life instances of the consequences. Recommended.

Becky says

This is one of those books that I have no idea how to review, but there will probably be... colorful language. Just sayin'. It was so good, so informative and interesting and maddening and frustrating and outrageous and nauseating and disheartening and hopeful and encouraging and inspiring that I just want to brandish it in peoples' faces at the bookstore or play it subliminally everywhere I go or leave copies in random places in the outside where people might pick it up or buy it in bulk as gifts for everyone I know and then hector all of them incessantly until they read it... because it needs to be read. It does. It should be required reading. They should teach this in schools.

Let's just be honest here. I picked this up because in this world that I fervently fucking hope is NOT Keystone Earth, Donald fucking Trump is sitting in the Oval Office. Ha Ha Ha... Who am I kidding? It's nighttime - he's in bed with some KFC... or worse. My point is, we have a pathetic joke for a "president", and the spineless meatbags currently in control of both the House and the Senate refuse to even try to pretend like they aren't just trying to take the money and run (sorry to misuse your lovely music so cruelly, Steve Miller), so in the mid-terms, we need alllllllll the votes we can get to try to fix this mess. And of course, the

"Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity" is trying to prevent just that. More on this to come.

So... yeah. I picked this up, hoping that it would be a battle cry of the newly political youth who see what's happening and are terrified and want to stop it. I still wish it was that... but as I learned after finishing that this was published in 2015, that was not to be. Probably for the best, because I can't even imagine how the book would have ended had poor Ari Berman had to try to incorporate the clusterfuck of the 2016 election cycle, and... Just... all of 2017. Maybe a 4-part sequel series?

It would have to be that long, because this was some well-researched writing. (And Mueller's not done with his investigation yet.) Honestly, if I had one criticism (and I don't) it would be that the book jumped around a bit too much, and that splitting it up would have helped keep track of the insane amount of information conveyed in a relatively short book. Maybe by year or decade, or court case or legislation activity, or racism level. Or all of the above. "1965, VRA enactment, Racism Level Extreme" Or "2015, VRA Gutted by SCOTUS, Racism Level 'Colorblind'". Etc.

I made so many notes in this single 12-hour audiobook that I achieved the Stenographer badge in the Audible app, apparently for making 40+ notes. But I seriously couldn't just let these injustices pass by without somehow venting the outrage... even if it was just in the app for myself. So much of the tactics and mindsets used to prevent other groups from being able to vote broke my heart.

And it was maddening to me that after the VRA was passed, those who fought SO. HARD. to win the right to vote without literacy tests, unfair impediments to voting, poll taxes, etc... would then turn right around and lobby AGAINST another disenfranchised group from gaining those same rights. I just can't understand it. I can't. I can be a callous, cynical person sometimes... but deep down, I have a way overactive empathy gland, and it was pinging like hell during this whole book, but especially this section. I just can't understand how Southern black people can fight and die for the right to fair access to voting, and then when Southern hispanic people - people living the same minority disenfranchised lives - say "Us too, por favor!" the newly enfranchised are against it. AGAINST!! UGH! Who do Civil Rights represent if not ALL of us??

I know that this view is the luxury of my privilege. I was not present in this fight. Hell, my mom was only an infant, and my dad was (maybe?) in kindergarten when the VRA was enacted in 1965. I have the luxury of 20/20 hindsight idealism. The leaders of this movement were new to politics, new to having actual voices that carried weight, new to having a whole group of people rely on them to not fuck this up, and probably didn't want to rock the boat too much and lose everything... I understand it. Intellectually. But it hurts my heart that our rights are so fragile and subject to political whim and power plays.

Just two days ago, a federal panel of judges and the Supreme Court upheld a map redrawing the Pennsylvania congressional districts. This is a huge win, because the previous map was gerrymandered in some crazy ways to ensure that Republicans would carry almost all of the districts. Here's the most famous - Called the Goofy Kicking Pluto (or Donald Duck) district, also known as PA's 7th Congressional District:

Now, to be fair, I was a bit conflicted while listening to this book, because there are cases of gerrymandering being used for the forces of good, as well. It was used to redraw districts in the south to give more voting weight to black people, in order to allow them to actually have the ability to make their votes count and not just be drowned out by the status quo. In areas which have historically tended to be discriminatory based on race, it was needed, the same as Affirmative Action was. It's not enough to say "OK, you have the right to vote, everyone's equal now, let's just continue on with life as normal." because the attitudes and the privilege and the prejudices haven't changed with the law. It was compared to (and I'm paraphrasing) allowing a person with a broken leg enter a race and thinking that is fair and that he has every chance to win, despite starting with a huge disadvantage.

So, while still on the high of winning fairer districts in my state just in time for candidate registration for mid-term elections, I had to admit that there are times when district manipulation is the right thing to do. Of course, then it gets twisted and misrepresented, along with Affirmative Action, which were intended to help level the playing field, as "racial quotas" which have to be met, and mean that Deserving White People Will Be Discriminated Against.

The horror.

One of the things that I found the most aggravating was the burden of proof required when it came to voting. The VRA was specifically aimed at Southern states that had a history of racial disenfranchisement (and no fucking shame about it either). When the Civil Rights leaders finally won this battle and the VRA was enacted, those states had to abide by certain prescriptions (changes to state voting laws and requirements had to be submitted to the federal authorities for approval to ensure that it would not prevent voting, etc) and were closely watched for compliance... at first. At first, it was stringent... but then the burden of proving voter discrimination fell on those being discriminated against, because those doing the discriminating are crafty fucking bastards and know how to play the game and the system.

Soon, "voter fraud" was just running absolutely rampant! /Sarcasm. But you know, they said it, so it must be true... because apparently there was no requirement to actually PROVE that anti-fraud laws were being used to actually combat voter fraud... it was enough that the intent to ensure "fair" elections was there. Which brings us to voter ID bills and right back to square one with voter disenfranchisement... but this time, lots more people get in the game! Because now, if you're any type of minority, elderly, ill, poor, were in jail, or heck, even if you just don't have a car, you get to play the role of Disqualified Voter!

Let's play! Were you unable to obtain your original, certified birth certificate from your home birth 78 years ago, 4 counties over, then get to the DMV 2 hours away that your granddaughter has to drive you to, along with 3 other forms of photo identification and address verification, to try to register to vote, only to find out that A) you can't same day register; B) Someone with a kinda sorta similar name to yours was once convicted of a crime, and you've been disqualified from voting "just in case", or C) You don't have the RIGHT types of ID required to register... So sorry, please try again next vote cycle.

But sure. Everyone has ID (or can easily get it) and it's no hindrance to voting at all. /SARCASM!

Anyway, I could go on... There's so much info in this book, and so much to SAY about it, that I could literally quote 3/4 of the book and give a running commentary on how fucked up it all is... but I'm sure that we get the point by now.

I am socially liberal. I believe in equality, regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. We're all humans and fucking deserve to be treated like it.

I believe every single adult citizen in this country should have the right to vote. No exceptions. Actually, I don't think it should be a right, I think it should be compulsory. Some countries have compulsory military service, and I think that the US should have compulsory voting. You can bet your ass I'll be voting in this election, and this book actually makes me want to start (or support) the sort of service aimed at helping people vote - not just registration, but getting birth certificates, ID cards, rides to the polls, etc.

Suck on that, vote suppressors!

Mlg says

Very well researched book on the recent history of voter suppression. It begins with the passage of the Voter Rights Act in 1965 and continues up until the Obama administration.

Many of the stories of voter suppression of blacks in the South are disgusting. Remedies were proposed and often were supported by both parties. Somewhere along the line, Republicans realized that with changing demographics, they couldn't win elections without cheating. Assaults on the VRA followed, along with gerrymandering, removal of voting machines from heavily Democratic or minority areas, ridiculous voter ID laws that tried to keep seniors or college students from voting. Purges of names from the voter rolls have kept thousands of legal voters from voting and may have affected the outcome of two different presidential elections.

Two figures emerge as major players. John Lewis has been one of true heroes of voters' rights, and John Roberts is one of the villains. Roberts was an active foe of the VRA and lied about his own views in his confirmation hearing. Once on the court, he led the court to its repeal. Those who disenfranchise others so that they can "win" stolen elections are really the lowest form of life in our democracy.

Scott Rhee says

Our Founding Fathers, in their wisdom, realizing that true democracy was both unrealistic and unworkable, chose as the model of our government a republic, whereby power resides in elected representatives given authority by the citizenry that elected them. Under this model of government, the most vital and important tool is the Vote.

History is awash in the blood of patriots who have fought and died for the Vote, and yet, today, sixteen years into the 21st century, forces are continually at work to destroy the Vote. The saddest and most disturbing aspect of this campaign to steal citizens' one and only democratic tool is that it is being done under the guise of a patriotic adherence to rigid interpretations of the U.S. Constitution.

Ari Berman, an investigative journalist whose work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *the New York Times*, and *the Nation*, has published the definitive history of the Vote in this country, emphasizing its importance to a healthy democratic process and determining the forces at work to destroy it, in his book, "Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America".

Berman's book begins on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, which was the site of a famous civil rights march, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965. Violent armed police officers attacked nonviolent demonstrators trying to cross the bridge. The nation was enraged by the sight of cruelty and viciousness of racist white Alabamans beating up unarmed peaceful black people who simply wanted to be able to vote in elections.

As a result, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in 1965. Considered to be the most important and effective pieces of civil rights legislation ever enacted, the VRA essentially put an end to the blatant discriminatory effects of Jim Crow, which included literacy tests, poll taxes, and many other unconstitutional and immoral attempts by white supremacists to keep minorities from their right to Vote, as decreed by the Fifteenth Amendment.

Improvements were noticed almost immediately after the signing. The numbers of black registered voters began to climb higher and higher every election year. The fight, however, continued to rage on. Mexican-

Americans and other Hispanics in western states were running into similar problems that black people faced before 1965.

Amendments were added to the VRA in 1975 by President Gerald Ford, including requiring some jurisdictions to have bilingual elections and significant voting law changes under Section 5 of the VRA. What was originally designed to help African-Americans now offered protection to Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans.

The VRA finally opened the door to the Vote to literally hundreds of thousands of Americans who were previously locked out. It also helped to initiate the careers of many minorities looking to find jobs within the government.

Unfortunately, detractors of the VRA continually tried to find ways to either circumvent the law or abolish it altogether. As Jesse Jackson once said in 1981, in some back-water counties throughout the country, the VRA “has been an Indian treaty. Everybody signed it, but nobody follows it. (p. 153)”

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of anti-VRA politicians are conservatives and Republicans. While racism has been, and always will be, nonpartisan, it’s simply a statistical fact that the most virulent VRA opponents and those who have worked the hardest to weaken the law have been Republicans.

Interestingly enough, Republicans justify their anti-VRA stance based on what they consider a pro-civil rights approach, claiming that in the decades since its inception, the VRA has successfully managed to wipe out almost all vestiges of racism in the electoral arena, therefore the law has outlived its usefulness. Furthermore, they claim, extending the law any further is, in itself, racist because it continues to fight racist state policies where no racism actually exists.

Many, if not all, conservatives against the VRA use the fear of potential quotas or proportional representation to defend their stance.

Armand Derfner, of the Lawyers’ Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC), calls this reasoning “a scare tactic. It was a fear that was not justified. In a lot of cases we were talking about, there were no blacks elected. We were trying to get from none to some. (p. 155)”

One of the more vocal VRA detractors, Abigail Thernstrom, said, “Voting rights has become another immensely complex affirmative action issue, distinctive only in not being acknowledged as such. (p. 181)”

Likening VRA to affirmative action, Republican politicians used this post-racial “color-blind” excuse to reduce the numbers of voters voting by targeting minorities, senior citizens, and poor people because, statistically, those groups tend to overwhelmingly vote Democratic.

Sadly, in 2015, the anti-VRA camp scored a major win when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Section 5 of the VRA, which compelled states (historically the Southern ones that have had the worst track record in voting rights violations) to have voting changes approved by the federal government. The justices who supported the overturning of Section 5 claimed that, while at one point it was useful, it was now an egregious example of federal overreach.

The late Justice Antonin Scalia (may he rot in peace) said that support for the VRA was based on nothing more than “a phenomena that is called perpetuation of racial entitlement”, certainly not winning any friends that day, except, perhaps, from fellow white supremacists.

One would think, based on the logic of the VRA opponents, that Section 5 violations would have noticeably decreased since 1965. In truth, the number of Section 5 violations have actually increased, as many states (to

be fair, not just the southern ones) continue to make voting changes that would reduce citizen access to the voting booths.

Since 1982, the Department of Justice has, under Section 5, fought numerous discriminatory voting changes, including 91 in Georgia, 105 in Texas, 112 in Mississippi, 96 in Louisiana, 73 in South Carolina, 46 in Alabama, and 45 in North Carolina. (p. 242) And detractors think the law has outlived its usefulness how?

It's almost inexplicable, until one begins to realize that the targeting of poor minorities and people with limited access is actually a boon for Republicans.

In some cases, it's not even people who are poor or with limited access. It's just blatant attempts to make it harder for anybody to vote. Citing cases of voting fraud that don't actually exist, many conservative politicians have enacted strict voting laws in the name of protecting the sanctity of voting.

David Iglesias, a U.S. attorney for New Mexico, says that voter fraud "is like boogeyman parents use to scare their children. It's frightening, and it doesn't exist. U.S. attorneys have better things to do with their time than chasing voter-fraud phantoms. (p. 231)"

It has always irked me when I talk to someone who admits, even brags, that they never vote, claiming that his or her vote "doesn't matter" or "won't make a difference". That kind of thinking is dangerous.

Now, when people say that to me, I can tell them that that kind of thinking is a slap in the face for all the countless people who have literally fought and died---and are continuing to do so---so that they could possess a right that they selfishly refuse to use

Dan says

This book is an onslaught. Berman, in meticulous detail, walks the reader through the history of the fight surrounding voting rights in modern times. From the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 up through the present day, he follows the ups and downs of the movement to secure the rights supposedly guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. I think this book will make you angry...real angry. But it might leave you with hope too. And it certainly will give you story after story of how conservatives from the Goldwater era to the Renquist/Regan era through today's Roberts court have continually used specious politicking to justify removing measures that increase voter turnout and instituting those that suppress it; how at every victory voting rights were eroded again first by more blatant racism but then by post-racial arguments of color-blindness. Did I mention this book will make you angry? But the fight goes on and in his journalistic style, he gives the stories of those still inspired by Selma who remember the folks who died for their right to vote and aren't ready to see their own taken away so easily.

I think everyone should read this book. It is dense, but it reveals so much about what is going on within our political system today.

Ian Rose says

This is not an easy read, either in terms of length or content. It's more of a textbook than a thriller, but it's exactly the textbook I wanted on the modern history of the right to vote and of the sustained attack on that right. If I could send one book right now to everyone I know with any political interest, this would be the

one.

Kristen says

After the President-Elect's comments about voter fraud, I can think of few issues more important for all citizens to understand. This book is essential reading for those concerned about voting rights.

Kayle Barnes says

Should be mandatory reading for everyone in advance of voting this election cycle.
Key takeaway: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EARLY VOTING!

Sushmita says

So. many. highlights. An exhaustive (but not entirely exhausting) review of voting rights in America. Berman covers the struggles, the triumphs, and the utter frustration as successive administrations build momentum to curtail voting rights starting with the Reagan administration and ultimately striking down Section 5 of the VRA in 2013.

Berman sprinkles some choice hyperbole throughout, like personal favorites: "Von Spakovsky's unusual name, which sounded like a nineteenth-century Austrian villain's..." or "Schlozman had a high-pitched nasal voice and a frat boy persona."

Golden eggs aside, I was just short of riveted...the only thing better being a politico-musical starring our Austrian villain & co. duking it out with the notorious RBG. Amiright?

Sloan says

An excellent description of the history of the Voting Rights Act and the profound threats facing the rights for all eligible citizens to vote. While it can be a depressing read, especially if the reader lived through the civil and voting rights battles of the 1960s, this is a book that demands reading as the movement to restrict voting rights continues to gain momentum. I recommend it highly.

Jean says

Berman says that the 1965 Voting Rights Amendment spawned an equally committed group of counterrevolutionaries. Since the V.R.A.'s passage, they have waged a decades-long campaign to restrict voting right. Berman argues that these counterrevolutionaries have in recent years controlled a majority on the Supreme Court and have set their sights on undoing the accomplishment of the 1960s Civil Rights movement.

Berman explores how the debate over voting rights for the past 50 years has been a debate between two competing visions: Should the Voting Rights Act “simply provide access to the ballot,” as conservatives claim, or should it “police a much broader scope of the election system, which includes encouraging greater representation for African-American and other minority groups”? Every time the VRA comes up for renewal, from 1969 to 2006 the broader interpretation is endorsed by the Congress. The Supreme Court repeatedly responded by imposing the narrower interpretation by judicial fiat. Berman goes into great detail citing Supreme Court actions during this timeframe up to and including the Roberts’ Court to date.

Berman shows how various Republican Presidents chose to do nothing that would affect their standing with black votes except for the gradual redistricting to create majority white or black districts.

In 2013 the Supreme Court by a 5-4 vote struck down the formula Congress had adopted in 1965 and renewed for identifying jurisdictions subject to federal oversight. Chief Justice Roberts held that it violated the Constitution. In her blistering dissent Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said Congress, not the Court, had the constitutional authority to define progress in Voting Rights.

In 2014 fourteen States adopted voting restrictions. The numbers of voters potentially affected by new barriers to the ballot box exceeded the margin of victory in close races for Senate and Governors in North Carolina, Kansas, Virginia and Florida.

Berman provides a narrative history rather than constitutional analysis. He just documents what has happened to the V.R.A. and documented the shift from Congress to the Court of the V.R.A. The book contains so much information that I just provided you with some brief highlights to help you decide to read the book. This is a must read book for every voter in this country. I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. Tom Zingarelli did a good job narrating the book.

Linda says

This book is about the Voting Rights Act, enacted in 1965 to prohibit racial discrimination in voting. The VRA was amended in 1970, 1975, 1982 and 2006. While the original intention of the Act was to ensure minorities would be able to register AND vote in elections, it has been manipulated by politicians (and lawyers), resulting in rules and regulations that left many people unable to vote in recent elections. Ari Berman provides a historical look at the VRA, from the Civil Rights movement and the passage of the Act by President Johnson, up to the Shelby County vs Holder 2013 case heard by the Supreme Court. Much of this history was new to me, and I learned quite a bit from this book. I found the first part of the book a bit tedious, and would have benefitted from a list of names and acronyms to help me keep everything clear, but the last two thirds of the book was easier to follow, perhaps because I was aware of more of the participants. The most important thing I take from this book, though, is the duty and necessity of voting in every election. I was surprised and saddened at how hard some politicians work to keep everyday Americans from voting! Vote!

Bookworm says

Unfortunately tedious read on a subject people don't know about. With the Voting Rights Act under fire and constant stories of electoral fraud (voters, machine glitches, lines cut off, names incorrect on ballot sheets, etc.), voting and the struggle to increase its accessibility has been a constant struggle. This book was supposed to trace the the US from the VRA to modern times, looking at the civil rights movements, political developments, the struggles and more. Unfortunately, it's really hard for me to get through.

Berman takes the reader through a history of the US through the struggle of voting from the VRA to the summer of 2014. He looks at it from presidents to activists to Congressman and more. It's informative, it's history that I did not know and wish I had learned at school. But it was like wading through molasses. The problem for me is that the author is journalist, and with many other books that are written by journalists it seems like the book is great in sections and in stops and starts, but sometimes it reads like a too-long magazine/newspaper article, which is the case here.

People will dislike the book because of the author's slant (He's a reporter at 'The Nation') but for me that really wasn't it. I wanted to enjoy this, or at least find it readable. It seems people liked it but I just couldn't get into it. He tries to weave the story of Congressman John Lewis (known for his work on civil rights) into the book. And while I understand that device, the book became a list of too many people, too many names, and while Lewis drops in and out as our anchor, I just felt Berman couldn't connect it together very well.

I normally don't have this much trouble reading non-fiction books written by journalists, but for me I really wish journalists would work with stronger book editors if they decide to switch gears and write a book. Recommend the library and hope you get more out of it than I did

David says

Voter suppression, in various forms, has been with us since the founding of our nation and it does not appear to be going away any time soon. Americans have used poll taxes, literacy tests, shortened registration periods, intimidation, murder, limited polling stations in "undesirable" districts, and a variety of other means to make it harder for certain kinds of people to vote. In short, we're very good at making certain disenfranchising practices legal, even though they conflict with the ideals and principles of our founding documents. The tension between state and federal oversight is particularly pronounced where voting is concerned. The Voting Rights Act, which is younger than I am, has been a thorn in the side of certain Americans since its inception. Conservatives recently succeeded in weakening one of the Act's key provisions in the Supreme Court's Shelby Count, AL ruling. Certain states, uneasy with President Obama's success, have taken a variety of steps to make it harder to vote: stricter ID requirements in reaction to non-existent fraud; limiting registration times to periods when lower income people are likely to be working and unable to get off work; fewer polling stations in poor areas; limiting early voting periods; forcing people to go to the DMV to register when some states (Texas) don't have DMV's in every county. The tactics are subtle, sinister, and un-American, but it's hard to imagine them going away anytime soon as white conservatives gain representation at the local level and project it on the national level.
