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Study: Discrimination in voting still a problem

U-M students suggest Congress take action

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Four decades after the federal government enacted a law to protect minorities' voting rights, racial discrimination is still a problem at the ballot box, according to a University of Michigan study released Thursday. U-M law students reviewed judges' findings in 323 lawsuits filed since 1982 across the country under a provision of the Voting Rights Act. While conditions have improved, the study points to the need for Congress to renew portions of the act that are due to expire in 2007, specifically a provision that requires certain communities to get federal or judicial approval to change their voting procedures. Examples of discrimination include efforts to block minorities from voting, trick them into casting illegitimate ballots that would not be counted, or dilute their voting power through redistricting.

The study also found that judges cited racially prejudicial campaign tactics in 31 of the lawsuits, including cases of photographs being manipulated to darken the skin of opposing candidates. In all, more than 100 students participated. Law professor Ellen Katz advised the students. U-M says the study is the first of its kind. "Congress needs to know if there's discrimination happening," Emma Cheuse, the student who led the study, said before the forum.

The Voting Rights Act was enacted in 1965 and later amended. It outlawed the use of literacy tests and other procedures that had been used to keep blacks from voting, among other things. An advocate for the renewal of the voting rights provision spoke at a forum at the law school Thursday about why it is important. Nina Perales of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund described how a Texas community sought to slash the number of early polling places in heavily minority areas in 2003. The community had not tried to get approval for the plan, likely because officials knew it would not be approved, and lawyers from her organization were able to convince a judge to block the move. "The cases are out there," Perales said. "I always get more phone calls than we can respond to."

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