Reconstructing Section 5: A Post-Katrina Proposal for Voting Rights Act Reform

**Abstract.** Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA)—the preclearance provision that is the most potent weapon in the nation’s civil rights arsenal—quietly suffered an unexpected defeat in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The “static benchmarking test” used to administer section 5 failed to fulfill a core VRA mandate: the preservation of minority political power. This Note provides the first critical account of this failure and argues that it transcends the specifics of Katrina. The Note then proposes a narrowly tailored doctrinal “fix” to resurrect section 5’s enforcement powers after a disaster.

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana and the Gulf Coast began the long march to recovery. Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive natural disaster in American history, resulting in approximately 1500 deaths in Louisiana alone and sparking a human displacement unrivaled since the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s. Although the Category 3 storm inflicted significant damage along the entire Gulf Coast, its wrath was felt most acutely in the city of New Orleans, where massive flooding overwhelmed poorly constructed levees and drowned vast stretches of the city.

Katrina’s primary victims were New Orleans’s most vulnerable citizens—those who could not afford to evacuate or who had homes in low-lying areas hit hardest by the flooding. Renters and African-American residents were

3. See LESSONS LEARNED, supra note 1, at 8; Timothy Egan, Uprooted and Scattered Far from the Familiar, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 11, 2005, § 1, at 1.
4. The flooding made much of New Orleans uninhabitable. According to one estimate, after Katrina, the city’s population plummeted from 460,000 to 171,000. Adam Nossiter, Bit by Bit, Some Outlines Emerge for a Shaken New Orleans, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 27, 2006, at A1.
5. See Christopher Tidmore, The Unusual Nature of Nagin’s Victory, LA. WKLY., May 29, 2006, at 1 (“While Caucasian Lakeview received the bulk of the initial flooding, most of the damaged areas of New Orleans were predominately Black. With the exception of Lakeview, whites tended to live on the higher plane of the Mississippi River Ridge . . . . African-Americans lived in the low lying, newer sections of New Orleans, which took the brunt of the storm’s damage when the floodwalls . . . . ruptured . . . .”).
6. See Class Action Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief para. 4, at 2, Ass’n of Cmtys. for Reform Now (ACORN) v. Blanco, No. 06-611 (E.D. La. Feb. 9, 2006) [hereinafter Class Action Complaint], available at http://www.loyno.edu/~quigley/blanco.pdf (noting that “more than half” of the 354,000 people who lived in areas that received moderate to severe damage were renters).
7. See id. para. 33, at 8 (“In four of the six neighborhoods that suffered the worst Katrina related damage, over 80% of the population is African-American. African-Americans resided in approximately 72% of the homes that flooded over six feet.”); Shaila Dewan et al., Evacuees’ Lives Still Upended Seven Months After Hurricane, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 22, 2006, at A1 (noting that white evacuees were less likely than black evacuees to have depleted their savings, to have been forced to borrow money, or to have lost their jobs as a result of the storm); see also John R. Logan, The Impact of Katrina: Race and Class in Storm-Damaged Neighborhoods 1, http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report.pdf (last visited Jan. 29, 2007)
particularly harmed; African-Americans constituted the majority of the displaced and, in the post-disaster period, tended to live farther away from New Orleans than white evacuees. Although many sought refuge in nearby cities like Baton Rouge, Katrina’s “diaspora” scattered most residents to cities outside of Louisiana, such as Houston and Atlanta.

Against this backdrop of devastation, Louisiana’s political leaders were charged with the unprecedented task of conducting elections with a displaced electorate. For generations, the state’s political system existed in an uneasy partisan and racial balance, with black voters often determining the outcomes of state and federal elections. New Orleans, with a population that was 67% African-American, was the center of minority political power in Louisiana. But Katrina struck a deep blow to the city’s minority electorate: between 27% and 48% of Orleans Parish voters were displaced, and of these voters, 75% were black. With New Orleans’s first post-Katrina municipal elections scheduled to take place in February 2006, and with rising speculation of an impending racial and political realignment, the Louisiana State Legislature began the highly contested process of developing new voting rules for a devastated democracy.

("[T]he storm’s impact was disproportionately borne by the region’s African American community, by people who rented their homes, and by the poor and unemployed.").

11. See Democrats Focus on Louisiana Races: Next Governor Will Be Unique; Breaux Mulls Senate Decision, CNN.COM, Nov. 7, 2003, http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/11/07/elections.senate/ (“A key to the outcome of the race could be the black vote, particularly in the city of New Orleans, where a heavy Democratic tide secured Landrieu’s margin of victory last year.”); see also Class Action Complaint, supra note 6, para. 26, at 7 (“Over 32% of Louisiana’s population is African American.”).
14. See, e.g., Sylvia Moreno, Displaced Voters Make Wishes Known for New Orleans: Primary Election for Mayor Is April 22, WASH. POST, Apr. 12, 2006, at A3 (quoting one displaced resident as saying that black voters “want to be a part of the rebuilding and have a voice in selecting someone who wants us back, because there’s a lot of people in New Orleans that’s trying to keep us out”); Peter Whoriskey, Nagin Among Front-Runners in New Orleans,
Because of its deep history of racially discriminatory politics, Louisiana must—in developing voting rules—comply with section 5, the most celebrated and controversial provision of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965. Section 5 requires Louisiana and other “covered jurisdictions” to preclear all changes in their voting laws with either the Department of Justice (DOJ) or a special three-judge district court in Washington, D.C., before the changes take effect. The provision was originally crafted in response to the persistent and creative tactics employed by covered jurisdictions to avoid federal civil rights mandates. By demanding preclearance for all voting changes—from the seemingly insignificant and uncontested, to the most critical and controversial—section 5 enlists the federal government as a constant chaperone in matters of state election administration.

The test used to enforce section 5, which I will call the “static benchmarking” test, was conceived by the Supreme Court in Beer v. United States to ward off voting changes that would result in a “retrogression” in minority voters’ “effective exercise of the electoral franchise.” The static benchmarking procedure detects movements in minority political power by

WASH. POST, Apr. 20, 2006, at A9 (quoting one political scientist as saying, “in blunt terms, some white voters see this as an opportunity to take back power”).

15. For background on Louisiana’s history of race relations, see Judge Wisdom’s extensive recounting in United States v. Louisiana, 225 F. Supp. 353 (E.D. La. 1963). In addition to being the first state to enact the notorious Grandfather Clause invalidated in Guinn v. United States, 238 U.S. 347 (1915), Louisiana passed the railcar statute at issue in Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), and was home to the infamous David Duke, the longtime Ku Klux Klan leader, who won the majority of the white vote in three state-wide elections, see D. Stephen Voss, Beyond Racial Threat: Failure of an Old Hypothesis in the New South, 58 J. POL. 1156, 1156 (1996). See generally Richard L. Engstrom et al., Louisiana, in QUIET REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH: THE IMPACT OF THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT, 1965-1990, at 103 (Chandler Davidson & Bernard Grofman eds., 1994).


17. See infra note 37.


20. Commentators have used other terms to describe the test that enforces section 5. See, e.g., Mark E. Haddad, Note, Getting Results Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, 94 YALE L.J. 139, 140 (1984) (calling it “the retrogression test”).

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comparing a proposed voting change to the existing voting laws in the jurisdiction seeking preclearance. If, applied to the current circumstances, the proposed law increases minority political power relative to the existing law, it is deemed “ameliorative” and is precleared.22 If the proposed law diminishes minority political power, it is deemed “retrogressive” and is permanently enjoined from taking effect.23 The static comparison thus guards against the crumbling of minority political power under the weight of new, retrogressive laws and ensures that, in the face of a retrogressive proposal, the status quo ante holds firm.24

Despite its unrivaled success in advancing and protecting minority political gains,25 section 5 quietly suffered one of its most disappointing failures in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as the static benchmarking test fell apart. Critically, static benchmarking assumes that current laws are capable of preserving existing minority political power;26 indeed, it is the step that completes the test’s “sixth-grade arithmetic.”27 Katrina shattered this

22. Id.
23. Id. If a proposed voting change neither increases nor decreases minority voting strength, it is also entitled to preclearance under section 5. See City of Lockhart v. United States, 460 U.S. 125, 134 n.10 (1983) (“[T]he Beer Court did not distinguish between ameliorative changes and changes that simply preserved current minority voting strength. The Court explained that the purpose of § 5 was to prohibit only retrogressive changes.”).
24. In this Note, I use the terms “minority political power,” “minority voting power,” and “minority influence” interchangeably to refer to minority voters’ “effective exercise of the electoral franchise”—a concept that is inherently broad. Determining whether there has been retrogression in minority voters’ effective exercise of the electoral franchise “depends on an examination of all the relevant circumstances, such as the ability of minority voters to elect their candidate of choice, the extent of the minority group’s opportunity to participate in the political process, and the feasibility of creating a nonretrogressive plan.” Georgia v. Ashcroft, 539 U.S. 461, 479 (2003). Furthermore, “[n]o single statistic provides courts with a shortcut to determine whether a voting change retrogresses from the benchmark.” Id. at 480 (quoting Johnson v. De Grandy, 512 U.S. 997, 1020-21 (1994)).
25. For data on the impact of the VRA on Louisiana politics, see Engstrom et al., supra note 15, at 103.
26. This assumption is quite common. See, e.g., John C. Jeffries, Jr. & Daryl J. Levinson, The Non-Retrogression Principle in Constitutional Law, 86 CAL. L. REV. 1211, 1214 (1998) (stating that existing voting laws are often “beneficial procedures” for minority political power); Pamela S. Karlan, Georgia v. Ashcroft and the Retrogression of Retrogression, 3 ELECTION L.J. 21, 21 (2004) (“[S]ection 5 contains a natural benchmark that preserves the political gains minority voters have achieved through political or legal action.”).
assumption and, in the process, vindicated Justice Thurgood Marshall’s prescient warning that static benchmarking “will not always be [able] to determine whether a new plan increases or decreases Negro voting power relative to the prior plan.”28 Marshall was concerned that in some contexts, a proposed law might always appear “positive—no matter how good or bad the result.”29

Hurricane Katrina provided a perfect example of what Justice Marshall feared. The massive human displacement and immense election infrastructure damage caused by the storm rendered Louisiana’s existing voting laws inadequate to conduct post-disaster elections: the number of absentee voters swelled, and those who remained in New Orleans lacked water, electricity, and stable shelter, much less access to polling locations and the Postal Service.30 If Louisiana held a post-Katrina election with the pre-Katrina voting laws, minority voting power would collapse;31 only aggressive procedural reforms could avoid this outcome. Yet when the state sought to preclear its emergency voting reforms, the static benchmarking test stubbornly relied on the inadequate pre-Katrina voting plan as a valid benchmark for comparison. Conceptually, this meant that compared to the broken pre-Katrina benchmark, almost any proposed law would appear ameliorative and would merit preclearance. A covered jurisdiction could therefore enact reforms that, despite improving existing laws, stopped far short of providing minority voters with the realistic opportunity to maintain their voting strength.32 Simply put, Hurricane Katrina revealed a blind spot in section 5’s enforcement powers.

This Note shines a critical light on section 5’s post-Katrina failure and suggests a narrowly tailored doctrinal “fix” to repair the provision. The proposed model replaces the static benchmarking test with a more flexible counterpart that I call “dynamic benchmarking.” Instead of automatically using existing voting laws as a benchmark, this procedure employs a multifactor examination to ensure that the current regime is actually capable of preserving minority political power. In the absence of a suitable existing benchmark, the dynamic test offers a “replacement benchmark”—a model voting plan that, if used after a disaster, would likely preserve minority influence. The replacement

29. Id. at 154 n.12.
31. See infra note 77 and accompanying text.
32. See infra Section II.B for a discussion that explains this phenomenon in greater detail.
benchmark thus resurrects section 5’s coercive power; if a covered jurisdiction proposes a post-disaster voting plan that is less robust than the replacement benchmark, preclearance will be denied. 33

The discussion that follows proceeds in three Parts. Part I introduces section 5 and outlines its development. It then details the contours of the static benchmarking test that has long defined section 5’s administration. Part II recounts for the first time the post-Katrina preclearance process and diagnoses section 5’s inability to adapt to the unprecedented challenges posed by Katrina. Part III unveils the dynamic benchmarking model and argues that it is both necessary and justified to remedy section 5’s weaknesses. Finally, the Conclusion calls on Congress to amend section 5 and to incorporate dynamic benchmarking as an alternative to the current static procedure. In addition to presenting traditional arguments for congressional action, it departs from doctrine to provide an alternative justification for the model I offer.

I. AN “UNCOMMON” ENFORCEMENT TOOL

A. Two Generations of Section 5

Since its enactment in 1965, section 5 of the Voting Rights Act has proven to be the nation’s most innovative and successful civil rights enforcement tool. The provision’s history is aptly divided into two “generations” of enforcement: the first generation focused primarily on providing equal access to the ballot box, while the second generation has been concerned with eradicating more subtle barriers to minority political empowerment. This Section briefly considers each generation in turn.

The first generation of section 5 enforcement occurred in response to the “unremitting and ingenious” tactics employed by certain states and localities—

33. Although the merits of this proposal are discussed more fully infra Section III.A, it is in part attractive because it takes no particular position in the longstanding debate on section 5’s merit, attempting only to fortify a central pillar of voting rights law. Most voting rights scholars who have participated in this debate are supportive of section 5’s continued existence and effectiveness, but some are either openly skeptical or clearly opposed to the provision. Richard H. Pildes and Samuel Issacharoff can be counted as section 5’s most notable skeptics. See, e.g., Issacharoff, supra note 27; Richard H. Pildes, The Supreme Court, 2003 Term—Foreword: The Constitutionalization of Democratic Politics, 118 HArv. L. REv. 29 (2004). Other commentators, like Abigail Thernstrom, have been deeply critical of DOJ’s section 5 administration and have called for allowing section 5 to expire. See, e.g., Abigail Thernstrom, More Notes from a Political Thicket, 44 EMoRY L.J. 911, 919-31 (1993); Abigail Thernstrom, Op-Ed., Emergency Exit, N.Y. SUN, July 29, 2005, at 10; Abigail Thernstrom & Edward Blum, Op-Ed., Do the Right Thing, WALL St. J., July 15, 2005, at A10.
mostly in the former Confederacy—to deny black citizens the right to vote
despite contrary federal mandates.34 Prior congressional attempts to
enfranchise black voters had generally been ignored by recalcitrant
jurisdictions, and “[i]n those relatively few instances when a court actually
enjoined a discriminatory practice, the affected jurisdiction would simply adopt
a new exclusionary tactic not covered by the court order—sometimes within
twenty-four hours.”35 To thwart the “outguess[ing]” of congressional and
judicial mandates,36 section 5 forced covered jurisdictions37 to obtain
preclearance from the DOJ or a declaratory judgment from a special three-
judge district court in the District of Columbia before a new voting law could
take effect. The covered jurisdiction maintained the burden of proving that its
proposed voting laws would not disadvantage minority voters. Until convinced
otherwise,38 the federal government would presume that the jurisdiction’s
proposed changes either reflected a racially discriminatory intent or would
produce a racially discriminatory effect. Section 5 thus cast a decidedly skeptical
eye on all voting changes in covered jurisdictions. In South Carolina v.
Katzenbach, the Supreme Court blessed this “uncommon”39 enforcement
structure—and its departure from federal deference to the states in election
administration—so that the nation could finally “shift the advantage of time
and inertia from the perpetrators of [voting discrimination] to its victims.”40
The focus on ensuring equal access to the ballot resulted in immediate success,
evidenced by dramatic increases in minority registration and political
participation throughout covered jurisdictions.41

35. Tokaji, supra note 19, at 791.
37. When the VRA was passed, a jurisdiction could become “covered” if: (1) it employed
literacy tests, and (2) less than 50% of its voting-age population was registered to vote by, or
eventually voted in, the 1964 presidential election. Additional districts were added to the
coverage list during the 1968 and 1982 congressional reauthorizations of the VRA’s
temporary provisions. See Civil Rights Div., U.S. Dep’t of Justice, About Section 5 of the
Voting Rights Act, http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/sec_5/about.htm (last visited Feb. 5,
2007) [hereinafter Civil Rights Div., About Section 5]. Section 5 was further extended in
1975 to target jurisdictions that conducted English-only elections. See Civil Rights Div., U.S.
voting/ sec_203/activ_203.htm (last visited Feb. 5, 2007).
38. See infra Section I.B.
40. Id. at 328.
41. See generally QUIET REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH, supra note 15 (canvassing the impact of the
VRA on covered jurisdictions).
Despite this first generation success, subtle structural barriers hindered the growth of minority political power. Covered jurisdictions, fearing that minority electoral victories would flow from increased minority political participation, deployed seemingly race-neutral strategies to minimize the electoral power of the newly enfranchised citizens.\(^{42}\) For instance, many jurisdictions adopted laws mandating that all candidates win elections in “at-large” districts, instead of in more localized, single-member districts.\(^{43}\) This kind of institutional design change effectively prevented minority voters from forming electoral majorities in smaller districts where they were numerically dominant.\(^ {44}\)

The retreat behind this race-neutral veil prompted the Supreme Court in *Allen v. State Board of Elections* to broaden section 5’s substantive reach to consider “the subtle, as well as the obvious” roadblocks employed by covered jurisdictions to frustrate minority political advancement.\(^ {45}\) The Court recognized that “[t]he right to vote can be affected by a dilution of voting power as well as by an absolute prohibition on casting a ballot.”\(^ {46}\) Thus, seemingly harmless voting changes that diminished minority voting power were deemed just as illicit as outright vote denials. After *Allen*, stratagems such as at-large districting changes, run-off requirements, and voter identification laws required section 5 preclearance to ensure that they were not stalking horses for discriminatory voting practices. In this so-called second generation of section 5 enforcement, the provision has demonstrated its extraordinary ability to advance and protect minority political power. Indeed, the move toward a more robust vision for section 5 “was arguably of greater importance in advancing black electoral opportunity than even the dismantling of literacy tests.”\(^ {47}\)

\(^{42}\) See Tokaji, *supra* note 19, at 794 (noting the tactics used to keep “legislative bodies largely segregated even after the VRA’s enactment”).


\(^{44}\) At-large elections contributed to the fact that “[t]en years after the enactment of the VRA, the number of southern African American legislators was only about one-third of its peak during Reconstruction.” See Tokaji, *supra* note 19, at 793.


\(^{46}\) *Id.* at 569.

\(^{47}\) Issacharoff, *supra* note 27, at 1729.
B. The Beer Retrogression Standard

In a key 1976 decision, the Supreme Court unveiled the doctrinal standard that has long guided section 5’s administration. *Beer v. United States* \(^{48}\) involved the review of New Orleans’s 1970 city council redistricting plan, which created a black voting majority in one out of the city’s five councilmanic districts. With the existence of racial bloc voting, or the cleavage of voting patterns along racial lines, this configuration meant that black voters would likely elect one black representative to the council. The city’s proposed plan stood in contrast to the previous councilmanic plan, which included no districts with a black voting majority and under which, predictably, no black candidate had won election to the council.

The city of New Orleans first submitted its new plan to the Department of Justice for administrative preclearance but was twice rebuffed after the DOJ objected that the proposed plan would not give minorities adequate voting strength—that is, strength in proportion to their population. \(^{49}\) The city subsequently sought preclearance from the three-judge district court, which also refused to sanction the new plan, holding that it had “the effect of abridging the right to vote on account of race or color.” \(^{50}\) The court noted that the city’s reapportionment plan realistically only provided minority voters with the chance to elect one black representative to the five-person body, despite the fact that black residents accounted for a substantially larger proportion of the city’s population. \(^{51}\) In other words, although the new plan was an improvement over the previous plan, it was not good enough to merit preclearance.

The city appealed directly to the Supreme Court, \(^ {52}\) arguing that the district court applied an erroneous preclearance standard under section 5. A five-Justice majority of the Court agreed and, in the process, declared that a plan would merit preclearance as long as it did not “retrogress” minority political power. \(^ {53}\)

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\(^{48}\) 425 U.S. 130 (1976).

\(^{49}\) See id. at 135.

\(^{50}\) See id. at 136.

\(^{51}\) See id. at 136-38 (recounting the district court’s reasoning).

\(^{52}\) Section 5 permits direct appeal to the Supreme Court for judicial preclearance decisions made by the three-judge district court. See 42 U.S.C. § 1973c (2000).

\(^{53}\) *Beer*, 425 U.S. at 141 (“[T]he purpose of § 5 has always been to insure that no voting-procedure changes would be made that would lead to a retrogression in the position of racial minorities with respect to their effective exercise of the electoral franchise.”).
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The Court’s new “retrogression standard” meant that a section 5 objection would attach only if a proposed change left minority voters with less political power than they had previously enjoyed. Under this standard, the Court found that the voting change in Beer was clearly ameliorative. Compared to the previous plan, which provided no minority representation, the new plan would reasonably lead to the election of one minority council representative. The city’s failure to go further in its reapportionment plan was immaterial because, with respect to minority political power, the new plan was clearly an improvement over its predecessor.

Despite the Beer Court’s assertion that the retrogression standard had “always” been the lodestar of section 5 review, it relied on a thin slice of the VRA’s legislative history to justify its holding. The Court cited a House of Representatives report that declared that section 5 should detect whether minority political power is “augmented, diminished, or not affected” by a proposed law. Relying heavily on this legislative language, the Court concluded that section 5 demanded a static comparison of a covered jurisdiction’s proposed and existing plans to detect impermissible movements in minority power. The existing plan established a baseline or benchmark of minority power against which new laws should be compared. Changes that augmented minority power relative to the existing plan would merit preclearance; changes that diminished minority political power would not.

55. 425 U.S. at 141.
56. See, e.g., Haddad, supra note 20, at 143 (calling the Court’s reading of the legislative history “highly interpretive”). Justice Marshall took issue with the Beer Court’s reading of the VRA’s legislative history in City of Lockhart v. United States, 460 U.S. 125, 144-45 (1983) (Marshall, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
57. Beer, 425 U.S. at 141 (emphasis omitted) (quoting H.R. REP. NO. 94-196, at 60 (1975)).
58. The Beer Court permitted an existing law to be used as a benchmark, even if that meant retrogression was a logical impossibility in the jurisdiction. In other words, if a jurisdiction provided no minority representation under an existing voting regime, the benchmark would be set at zero. Thus, a jurisdiction could conceivably gain preclearance for new laws that perpetually denied minority voters the chance to elect a minority representative. This less than charitable interpretation of section 5 has been vigorously criticized by four Justices, who, speaking through Justice Souter, argued that “the full legislative history shows beyond any doubt just what the unqualified text of § 5 provides. . . . [T]he preclearance requirement was not enacted to authorize covered jurisdictions to pour old poison into new bottles.” Reno v. Bossier Parish Sch. Bd. (Bossier Parish II), 528 U.S. 320, 366 (2000) (Souter, J., dissenting).
With the static benchmarking test, section 5 thus established a “one-way ratchet” for minority political power.60

Since Beer, the Court has consistently relied on the static test to enforce the retrogression standard and the “limited substantive” role it grants section 5.61 Read as a whole, the Court’s section 5 jurisprudence stands for a simple proposition: the retrogression standard, properly applied, promises only that minority voters will be protected from an impermissible “backsliding” in their political power.62 So understood, the animating concern of section 5 is the preservation, not the advancement or maximization, of minority voting strength.63 As I demonstrate later, the static test failed to uphold even this limited retrogression standard in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Substantive criticisms aside,64 the inherent predictability of the retrogression standard is one of section 5’s longstanding strengths. Jurisdictions know what is expected of them to clear the section 5 hurdle. The unwavering retrogression standard allows section 5 to operate principally as a deterrence tool—the “sword of Damocles”65—that curbs retrogressive laws

60. Issacharoff, supra note 27, at 1711. This conception of the VRA borrows from the constitutional “ratchet theory” discussed in a footnote in Katzenbach v. Morgan, 384 U.S. 641, 651 n.10 (1966). The constitutional ratchet theory holds that Congress, acting pursuant to its enforcement powers, may never take action designed to “restrict, abrogate, or dilute” constitutional rights. Id.; see also Miss. Univ. for Women v. Hogan, 458 U.S. 718 (1982) (affirming the ratchet theory).
61. Bush v. Vera, 517 U.S. 952, 982 (1996). The retrogression standard and, by extension, the static benchmarking test were upheld in City of Lockhart, 460 U.S. at 134 n.10.
63. See Miller v. Johnson, 515 U.S. 900 (1995) (rejecting the DOJ’s practice of denying preclearance to voting changes that increased, but did not maximize, minority political power); see also Reno v. Bossier Parish Sch. Bd. (Bossier Parish I), 520 U.S. 471 (1997) (ending the DOJ’s longstanding practice of denying preclearance to voting changes that likely violated section 2 of the VRA). In its recent VRA reauthorization, Pub. L. No. 109-246, 120 Stat. 577 (2006), Congress overturned two of the Court’s section 5 decisions, Bossier Parish II, 528 U.S. 320, and Georgia v. Ashcroft, 539 U.S. 461 (2003), that seemed to narrow the Beer retrogression standard. See S. REP. NO. 109-295, at 15 (2006) (“The[se] changes work together and are designed to protect minorities from purposeful, unconstitutional discrimination and to eliminate potential obstacles to minority representation in elected bodies. With regard to redistricting plans, they protect naturally occurring districts that have a clear majority of minority voters.”).
64. See, e.g., Ellen D. Katz, Federalism, Preclearance, and the Rehnquist Court, 46 VILL. L. REV. 1179, 1198 (2001) (questioning the Beer Court’s interpretation of the VRA’s legislative history); Haddad, supra note 20 (same).
even before submission to the DOJ. A preclearance denial serves a powerful
shaming function, as rejection is a publicly announced indictment that a
covered jurisdiction’s democratic process is tainted by racial discrimination.

Historical data tracking preclearance submissions attest to the provision’s
deterrent power. The majority of voting changes are crafted “in the shadow of
section 5” and are therefore easily precleared. Others are quickly amended
after the fact to address concerns expressed by the DOJ. Functioning in this
manner, the preclearance process lends the DOJ coercive power and the ability
to negotiate with a covered jurisdiction from a position of strength. Unless a
jurisdiction is willing to endure the more onerous judicial preclearance process,
DOJ review is the final word on whether a proposed plan ever becomes law.

II. THE POST-KATRINA PRECLEARANCE PROCESS

This Part turns to a previously unexplored breakdown in section 5’s
enforcement powers. It recounts Louisiana’s contentious post-Katrina

66. See, e.g., Michael J. Pitts, Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act: A Once and Future Remedy?, 81
greatest influence in the prevention of unconstitutional voting-related discrimination.
Jurisdictions covered by Section 5 are acutely aware of the need to garner federal approval.
For example, in the context of redistricting, discussion and debate at the state and local level
often focuses on how the Department of Justice will view the changes made.”).

67. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 721 n.43 (discussing section 5 as a “shaming” device).

68. See Karlan, supra note 26, at 36. Every year, the DOJ reviews between 15,000 and 24,000
voting changes. Civil Rights Div., About Section 5, supra note 37. Of these changes, only a
handful are denied preclearance. See Richard L. Hasen, Congressional Power To Renew the
P preclearance Provisions of the Voting Rights Act After Tennessee v. Lane, 66 OHIO ST. L.J. 177,
192 (2005) (noting a decline, from 4.06% in 1968-1972 to 0.05% in 1998-2002, in the
percentage of submissions denied preclearance).

69. See Drew S. Days III, Section 5 and the Role of the Justice Department, in CONTROVERSIES IN
MINORITY VOTING: THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT IN PERSPECTIVE 52, 61 (Bernard Grofman &
Chandler Davidson eds., 1992). But see HOWARD BALL ET AL., COMPROMISED COMPLIANCE:
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 1965 VOTING RIGHTS ACT 88-89 (1982) (discussing the DOJ’s
position of weakness in negotiations).

70. Though covered jurisdictions may obtain preclearance administratively from the DOJ or
judicially from the three-judge district court, the overwhelming majority of jurisdictions opt
for administrative preclearance. Compared to judicial preclearance, administrative review
offers a faster, less expensive method of obtaining preclearance. The DOJ only has sixty days
to grant or deny preclearance after the proposed change is submitted for review. If the sixty
days pass without a decision, the proposed change automatically takes effect. If the Voting
Section of the DOJ, which performs the bulk of the analysis and investigation during a
review, requires more information, it can submit a formal request that automatically resets
the sixty-day clock. See Civil Rights Div., About Section 5, supra note 37.
preclearance process and ultimately diagnoses section 5 as doctrinally unequipped to adapt to the post-Katrina challenge.

A. The Emergency Voting Plan

Operating without a historical model and under heightened public scrutiny,71 the Louisiana government was charged with crafting an emergency voting plan to respond to the damage caused by Katrina. After chronicling the legislative battle to reform simple voting procedures, this Section details the controversy surrounding a crucial point of contention: whether the state would rely on traditional mail-based forms of absentee voting to accommodate Katrina’s displaced, or whether it would instead adopt a far-reaching “satellite voting” measure that would allow the displaced to vote in person at polling sites located around the country.72

Governor Kathleen Blanco began the post-Katrina reform process by taking two decisive actions. First, she issued an executive order delaying New Orleans’s primary and general municipal elections, which were to be held in February and March 2006, respectively.73 On its face, the executive order was an honest admission that, months after Katrina hit, the city was still too devastated to conduct a fair and safe election.74

Second, the Governor convened two emergency sessions of the Louisiana State Legislature—one in November 2005, and one in February 2006—to consider new voting procedures for the post-disaster elections. The first session was filled with pressing legislative reforms, and in her call to convene the Governor suggested a series of election-related items for the legislature to

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72. See infra notes 92-99 and accompanying text.


74. Cf. id. at 1 (justifying the delay based on the need to “minimize to whatever degree possible a person[’]s exposure to danger” and to “protect the integrity of the electoral process” (quoting LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 18:401.1 (Supp. 2006))).
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consider. 75 One item asked the legislature to suspend the annual voter canvass, a process mandated by state law to verify that all registered voters were still residents of their home parishes. 76 A voter who had moved outside his home parish and had, for instance, filed a change of address form with the Postal Service could be declared ineligible and removed from the voter rolls. If it remained in effect, the canvass could disqualify nearly all displaced voters who were now living outside of New Orleans. 77 A second item sought the creation of a framework statute to empower the state’s chief election officer, the Secretary of State, to formulate a logistical plan for post-disaster voting. 78 Both items were modest and uncontroversial and therefore easily passed the legislature. 79

Despite the ease with which these reforms obtained approval, another seemingly uncontroversial procedural reform—a bill introduced by a state senator to relax a state law that prohibited first-time voters from voting absentee in their first election—was defeated. 80 The legislature’s rejection of this proposal raised suspicions of its unwillingness to take aggressive steps to help displaced residents participate in the elections. Preserving the first-time absentee voter rule would bar nearly 10,000 newly registered—and newly displaced—voters from participating in New Orleans’s municipal elections unless they returned to the city to vote in person. 81 At a hearing concerning the

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76. See id.

77. See La. REV. STAT. ANN. § 18:192 (2004) (requiring that the registrar mail an address confirmation card to all registered voters, but that “[i]f the card is returned and . . . if the corrected address provided [by the Postal Service] is outside the parish, the registrar then shall follow the procedure set forth in R.S. 18:193 with respect to challenge and cancellation on the ground that the registrar has reason to believe that the registrant is no longer qualified to be registered”). This law had the potential to disqualify those displaced by Katrina, given that many filed change of address forms with the Postal Service that noted their new, out-of-state addresses.

78. Cf. La. Proclamation No. 62 KBB 2005, supra note 75 (empowering the extraordinary session “[t]o legislate as to the holding of elections impaired as the result of a gubernatorially declared disaster or emergency”).


81. See Class Action Complaint, supra note 6, para. 29, at 8 (“[A]pproximately 10,000 displaced Orleans Parish residents who have registered by mail to vote will be voting for the first time in the April or May 2006 primary or general elections.”).

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pace and scope of the state’s election reforms, Judge Ivan Lemelle—the presiding federal judge—brought up the legislature’s rejection of the relaxed absentee voter proposal “out of the blue” and strongly hinted that if the legislature did not reconsider its rejection, he was prepared “to take over [the] elections.”

Likely motivated in part by this threat of judicial intervention, the legislature adopted the absentee voting reform during the second emergency session.

The legislature, however, refused to proceed with other voting reforms, including a proposal that would have allowed displaced residents to vote early at selected offices of the registrar outside of Orleans Parish. Although the reform was considered a relatively uncontentious precursor to more far-reaching proposals preferred by some lawmakers and civil rights groups, the legislature, voting along party and racial lines, rejected the provision. This rejection prompted black lawmakers to walk out of the legislature in protest, accusing the opposition of being motivated by racial animus and opportunism. Following the walkout, one state senator commented that


84. Id.


87. See, e.g., Anderson, supra note 86.
“[t]here are people who still don’t want [blacks] people to vote.”88 Marc Morial, the former Mayor of New Orleans and president of the National Urban League, called the walkout “unprecedented” and opined that “the act of the legislature is tantamount to an act of disenfranchisement. I think it’s an act that borders on being a 21st century poll tax.”89

The protest dramatically raised the stakes by highlighting the legislature’s inaction. Judge Lemelle convened a conference call with state officials, warning that the legislature’s intransigence could “lead to the disenfranchisement of Orleans Parish [v]oters” and could prompt him to intervene “[i]f the legislature fails to deal with this issue in a manner that complies with federal Voting Rights laws.”90 Demonstrating once again that it responded best to the threat of intervention, the legislature approved the early voting measure only two days after first rejecting it.91

The legislature’s hard line against seemingly uncontroversial reforms chilled serious consideration of the principal voting reform sought by several lawmakers and civil rights groups—the establishment of “satellite voting” locations for displaced residents living outside the state. Instead of having voters cast their ballots through the mail, the satellite procedure would allow citizens to cast their votes in person at polling stations established in areas with substantial concentrations of Katrina evacuees.92 The Secretary of State determined that satellite voting was logistically feasible:93 Louisiana election officials would staff the satellite locations with traditional voting equipment and voter registration lists to reduce the potential for fraud. Satellite voting was arguably the only remedy that would not disadvantage the hundreds of thousands of minority voters living outside the state. In addition to the

89. Marc Morial, President, Nat’l Urban League, Address at the National Press Club Luncheon (Feb. 14, 2006).
93. Class Action Complaint, supra note 6, para. 50, at 12 (“[T]he Secretary of State has determined that it is feasible to conduct out-of-state satellite voting in the nine states that he has identified as having the highest concentrations of displaced persons.”).
continuing breakdowns in the Postal Service, many of the displaced still relied on temporary shelters, and neither the state nor the federal government could establish with exact precision the addresses of all registered voters scattered by Katrina. These structural deficiencies demonstrated the inferiority of traditional mail-based voting methods relative to a satellite voting alternative. Supporters of satellite voting bolstered their argument by pointing out that it was a historically precedented voting procedure—soldiers in the Civil War relied on satellite voting booths to vote absentee from the field and, more recently, Iraqi citizens living in the United States used satellite voting locations to vote in their country’s first postwar elections. In addition, 

94. See, e.g., Michelle Hunter, Local Mail Delivery Is Slowly Improving: But No Magazines Go to ZIP Code 701, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Feb. 5, 2006, at A1 (noting a five-month delay in mail delivery); Michelle Hunter, Neither Rain Nor Sleet?: The Storm Has Passed, the Cleanup Is Under Way and Local Residents Want at Least One Piece of Their Normal, Pre-Katrina Lives Back: Their Mail, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Nov. 23, 2005, at A1 (discussing the heavy infrastructure and personnel damage to the Postal Service that persisted months after Katrina); Michelle Hunter & Sheila Grissett, Some Residents Find They’ve Got Mail: Carriers May Delay Delivery If Address Looks Unsafe, Vacant, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Sept. 22, 2005, at B1 (noting initial postal delays immediately after Katrina).

95. See, e.g., Shaila Dewan, Storm Evacuees Found To Suffer Health Setbacks, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 18, 2006, at A1 (noting that, by April 2006, the average Katrina evacuee had moved 3.5 times). Katrina evacuees also relied on private sources of shelter that were more efficient at providing immediate help in the aftermath of the storm. See, e.g., HURRICANE KATRINA RESPONSE PROJECT, supra note 10, at 1; Hamil R. Harris & Jacqueline L. Salmon, Churches Still Await Katrina Aid: Bush-Clinton Fund Criticized for Delay in Allocating $20 Million, WASH. POST., Mar. 2, 2006, at A10.

96. Locating the displaced was extraordinarily difficult for the government. The Louisiana Secretary of State relied heavily on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) list to contact voters but had to threaten suit before getting access to the FEMA data. See Melinda Deslatte, After Seeking Lawsuit Against FEMA for Voter Information, HOUSTON CHRON., Dec. 21, 2005, http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/nation/3339254.html. Meanwhile, candidates for office were denied access to the government’s list of displaced voters and had to rely on privately created lists that were just as unreliable—if not more so—than the government’s list. See Tidmore, supra note 5, at 3 (quoting one political consultant as describing these private lists as “helter-skelter-cross-your-fingers-slapped-together-let’s-pray-it’s-accurate mail and phone lists”).


supporters argued, relying on traditional forms of absentee balloting seemed to
turn the logic of voting on its head. Normally, a voter assumes the additional
administrative burden of the absentee procedure in return for the convenience
of voting absentee. Katrina’s displaced, by contrast, made no such rational
decision. Asking them to shoulder an additional burden to participate in the
elections—on top of the extraordinary and more immediate hardships they
faced—seemed to violate a fundamental notion of fairness.99

Yet with the second emergency session dominated by the controversy over
more modest voting reforms, there was no time remaining in the session to
give satellite voting sustained consideration. Instead, black lawmakers
attempted to introduce the provision in a subsequent legislative session in
March 2006. The proposal deadlocked the Committee on Senate and
Governmental Affairs and failed to reach the Louisiana Senate floor.100
Although supportive committee members argued vigorously for satellite
voting, opponents defeated the measure in part by making the legally dubious
claim that, by adopting satellite voting in select cities with the largest
populations of evacuees, the legislature would run afoul of the Equal Protection
Clause and would issue “an invitation to litigation in every sense of the
word.”101 Other opponents, such as the treasurer of the state Republican Party,
summarized his opposition to satellite voting by bluntly declaring: “This is
absurd; it goes too far.”102

The legislature’s refusal to permit satellite voting meant that the state’s
post-Katrina emergency plan was controversial for what it failed to provide.103
Some civil rights groups—including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund—
continued with litigation alleging that the state’s rejection of satellite voting

99. Some voters openly expressed this sentiment. See Brian Thevenot & Leslie Williams, 2,190
Cast Early Ballots in New Orleans Elections, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), Apr. 11, 2006, at
A1 (quoting one sixty-two-year-old retiree as saying, “I lived in New Orleans all my life. I
worked in New Orleans. I paid taxes. I bought a home. I’ve been a good citizen. I shouldn’t
have to go out of my way to vote.”).


101. See id. Opponents of satellite voting advanced this argument despite the fact that no civil
rights group was threatening litigation if satellite voting were adopted. In fact, satellite
voting was the precise remedy sought by the civil rights groups. See Wallace Petition, supra
note 82, para. 81, at 30.

102. Anderson, supra note 100.

103. In addition to the reforms discussed above, the state’s emergency plan consisted largely of a
voter information campaign to notify displaced citizens of their voting rights, the provision
of additional election commissioners, and the provision of additional voting equipment. See
Class Action Complaint, supra note 6, paras. 36-40, at 9-10.
constituted an impermissible vote denial under section 2 of the VRA\textsuperscript{104} and an illicit burden on the right to vote under the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{105} But given the lack of supportive doctrine,\textsuperscript{106} these creative legal arguments failed to convince the court that the legislature—by refusing to do more—violated statutory or constitutional authority.\textsuperscript{107}

The basket of legislative reforms thus remained modest. Displaced voters would be exempt from first-time absentee voter rules, would avoid the direct disenfranchisement associated with the annual voter canvass, and would be permitted to vote early at selected sites within the state. In addition, the legislature authorized the Secretary of State to outline a plan to conduct a voter information campaign to reach the displaced. Yet as this Section has

\textsuperscript{104} Section 2’s statutory mandate closely traces the Fifteenth Amendment, ensuring that\n\begin{quote}
[n]o voting qualification or prerequisite to voting or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision in a manner which results in a denial or abridgment of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{105} See Brief for Plaintiffs, Wallace v. Chertoff, No. 05-5519 (E.D. La. Feb. 21, 2006).

\textsuperscript{106} Multifactor tests designed by Congress and the Supreme Court to ferret out discrimination in redistricting cases have made section 2 a doctrine-less vehicle outside of a narrow band of circumstances. See ISSACHAROFF ET AL., supra note 104, at 689. For a discussion of how section 2 has essentially become a boutique doctrine, see Heather K. Gerken, Understanding the Right to an Undiluted Vote, 114 HARV. L. REV. 1663, 1674 (2001). See also Heather K. Way, Note, A Shield or a Sword? Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act and the Argument for the Incorporation of Section 2, 74 TEX. L. REV. 1439, 1474 (1996) (“[I]n order to succeed [under section 2], a party must be organized, possess adequate financial resources, and acquire a large amount of historical and technical documentation . . . .”).

\textsuperscript{107} See Minute Entry, Wallace v. Chertoff, No. 05-5519 (E.D. La. Feb. 24, 2006) (noting the court’s decision to dismiss the consolidated cases without prejudice).
demonstrated, many of these reforms were contested, and some were initially rejected before a combination of political pressure and threatened judicial intervention prompted the legislature to adopt them. The legislature’s actions hardly demonstrated an eagerness to accommodate Katrina evacuees, and its limited emergency reforms seemed to constitute the bare minimum needed to conduct post-disaster elections. Whether these reforms would preserve minority voting power was a question for section 5 preclearance to resolve.

B. The Preclearance Paradox

With the legislative reform process completed, Louisiana sought to preclear its emergency plan with the DOJ. The DOJ had been expecting the state’s submission and had even contacted state officials immediately after Katrina to promise to “expedite the review of any and all submissions of voting changes” to deal with Katrina’s aftermath.108

The state’s reforms were subjected to the static benchmarking test to ensure that its voting changes did not retrogress minority political power. When faced with Louisiana’s post-Katrina emergency voting plan, however, the static benchmarking test fell apart and deprived the DOJ of the ability to make any credible threat to deny preclearance. To understand this breakdown, it is helpful to retrace the simple procedural steps that defined the static analysis. First, the static test used Louisiana’s pre-Katrina voting laws (applied to the post-Katrina state of affairs) as the benchmark for comparison. It then compared the state’s proposed emergency voting plan (also applied to the post-Katrina state of affairs) against this benchmark and asked whether minority voters would be better off with the reforms than without them.109 Predictably, the test concluded that the state’s voting reforms were ameliorative, implying that minority voting power would increase as a result of the emergency plan.110 This conclusion is undoubtedly correct in a narrow sense: the procedural reforms, combined with the voter information campaign, would increase minority voting strength relative to an election held without the reforms.


109. See Letter from William E. Moschella, Assistant Attorney Gen., to Rep. John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Minority Member, House Comm. on the Judiciary 3-5 (Mar. 16, 2006) (on file with author) (“[T]he sole Section 5 inquiry is whether New Orleans voters would be better off without . . . [the] provisions enacted by the State to ameliorate voting conditions for the displaced individuals.”).

110. See id. at 2-3.
Yet a closer look reveals a critical lapse in the static analysis. The pre-Katrina laws, if used for a post-Katrina election, clearly would have led to a dramatic reduction in minority voting power. For instance, residency requirements alone would have disenfranchised a substantial portion of the hundreds of thousands of displaced residents living outside the state.\(^{111}\) The DOJ was nevertheless doctrinally bound to use the anachronistic pre-Katrina laws as a benchmark. The use of this benchmark essentially predetermined the outcome of the static test: compared to the pre-Katrina plan, virtually any post-Katrina plan would appear ameliorative, even one that led to a substantial *decrease* in minority voting power from pre-Katrina levels. This result rendered the retrogression standard a nullity and undermined the usefulness of the static test as a workable barometer of illicit reductions in minority voting power.

It was a critical assumption built into the static benchmarking procedure that preordained this result: static benchmarking presumes that a jurisdiction’s existing voting laws will preserve minority voting strength.\(^ {112}\) In most cases, this assumption is unproblematic; as long as the circumstances in the jurisdiction do not dramatically change, existing laws will likely maintain minority influence. However, the logic of static benchmarking breaks down if the test’s animating assumption is called into question by an intervening event that renders the existing voting plan unable to preserve minority voting strength.

To illustrate, imagine a jurisdiction that allows citizens to vote only by mail.\(^ {113}\) Under normal circumstances and under the existing laws, minority citizens in the jurisdiction consistently wield enough voting influence to elect six out of ten members of the city council. Now imagine that a disaster hits this jurisdiction and cripples the Postal Service in predominantly minority neighborhoods. As a result of the damage to this crucial election infrastructure, minority participation would predictably suffer—compared to their usual six city council seats, minority voters might, for instance, control only three. Simply stated, the predisaster plan would fail to preserve minority political power.

Static benchmarking would nevertheless use this deficient plan as a valid benchmark for comparison when a post-disaster law was submitted for preclearance. As long as the new law made voters relatively better off— for

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111. See *supra* note 77 and accompanying text.
113. The state of Oregon currently employs a variation of this mail-only voting system. See OR. REV. STAT. § 254.465(1) (2005) (“An election held on the date of the primary or general election shall be conducted by mail.”).
instance, by permitting alternative forms of voting—the government would deem it ameliorative and would grant preclearance. This result would occur despite the real possibility that the new law might stop short of maintaining minority control of six council seats. The new regime might instead result in minority control of only four seats—clearly an improvement over the three seats the existing laws would provide in a post-disaster election, but also fewer than the six seats that had long characterized minority political power in the jurisdiction. The precleared law could thus appear ameliorative relative to the broken benchmark but still result in an unmistakable retrogression in minority influence from its predisaster level. This wrinkle in static benchmarking’s normally straightforward logic exerts a crippling effect on section 5’s ability to avoid reductions in minority political power.114

The above scenario epitomizes a longstanding concern about static benchmarking.115 When confronted with complex circumstances such as an unprecedented disaster, the procedure’s one-dimensional analysis, often seen as its principal strength,116 becomes a decisive weakness. Instead of preventing clearly retrogressive outcomes, static benchmarking unwittingly blesses them.

The DOJ’s posture during the post-Katrina preclearance process reflected this paradox. The Justice Department admittedly held no leverage over Louisiana117 and had no choice but to preclear any plan, no matter how uncharitable, that improved the pre-Katrina voting laws. To its credit, the DOJ used its communications with Louisiana officials to encourage the state to include particular voting procedures.118 Yet had the state declined the DOJ’s advice out of hand, it would still have received preclearance. This paradox makes section 5 a paper tiger in the aftermath of an unprecedented disaster. It gives the DOJ the veneer of coercive power without actually empowering it to withhold preclearance from anyone except the “incompetent retrogressor.”119 Also, without the threat of a preclearance denial, jurisdictions that might normally legislate “in the shadow of the law” to gain section 5 approval are

114. I am indebted to Robert Scott for helpful discussions on this point.
115. See supra notes 28-29 and accompanying text.
116. See, e.g., Donahue, supra note 54, at 1657-58.
117. Although the DOJ rarely discloses the reasoning behind its preclearance decisions, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights strongly suggested that the Department was doctrinally disarmed by section 5’s static test. See Letter from William E. Moschella to Rep. John Conyers, Jr., supra note 109, at 3.
118. See id. at 4-5 (recounting the procedural actions the DOJ encouraged the state to take).
119. Justice Scalia coined this phrase in Bossier Parish II, 528 U.S. 320, 332 (2000). It refers to “a jurisdiction that has intended—but failed—to effect a retrogression” in minority political power. Donahue, supra note 54, at 1661.
effectively freed from any substantive obligations under the provision. A jurisdiction may then choose to take only minor steps to avoid retrogression, knowing that section 5 no longer has the potential to fall like the “sword of Damocles.”

III. RETROGRESSION RECONSIDERED

Having identified a troubling blind spot in section 5’s administration, I now propose a doctrinal “fix” to resurrect section 5’s post-disaster enforcement power. This Part presents an alternative to the static benchmarking test that is actually capable of upholding the modest retrogression principle announced by the Court in *Beer*.

A. Dynamic Benchmarking

Although static benchmarking has long defined section 5’s administration, nothing in *Beer* or its progeny suggests that it is mandated. Instead, the single lodestar of section 5’s administration is the retrogression standard—the promise that minority voting power will never backslide, or retrogress, as a result of new voting laws. Because static benchmarking is incapable of enforcing this retrogression standard after a disaster, I propose a more effective “dynamic benchmarking” alternative.120

The dynamic benchmarking model comprises two steps. The first step applies a multifactor threshold examination of existing voting laws to ensure that they are capable of preserving minority voting strength. If the existing laws cannot preserve this strength, the DOJ or district court will be barred from using them as a valid benchmark. The second step then mandates that the DOJ or district court develop a “replacement benchmark”—a model voting plan that, if used in a post-disaster election, would give minority voters a realistic opportunity to preserve their voting strength. These steps enable dynamic benchmarking to reject post-disaster voting plans that are technically

120. It is important to emphasize that the dynamic proposal I advance is limited to disaster situations. Although the proposal might seem like a nuanced alternative to the static test’s blunt application, expanding its application beyond disasters—to reach situations in which, for instance, gradual changes in demographics reduce minority voting strength—would likely outstrip section 5’s constitutional mandate. See, e.g., *Bush v. Vera*, 517 U.S. 952, 983 (1996) (plurality opinion) (cautioning that the retrogression standard is “not a license for the State to do whatever it deems necessary to ensure continued minority electoral success” (emphasis omitted)).
ameliorative compared to predisaster laws yet actually result in illicit retrogression.

1. Assessing the Existing Voting Regime

The first step in dynamic benchmarking is a threshold examination of a jurisdiction’s existing voting laws to determine whether they are truly capable of maintaining existing minority voting strength. The DOJ or district court should be empowered to question the workability of existing voting laws in light of an intervening event, such as a storm or terrorist attack. A logical trigger for this initial examination is a federal disaster declaration under the Stafford Act.\textsuperscript{121} To ensure a principled review, the inquiry should be guided by clear factors including, but not limited to: (1) the extent of voter displacement, (2) damage to the infrastructure and channels of election administration, and (3) racial disparities in voting patterns that would be exacerbated by the existing plan. These factors, which are briefly discussed below, are meant to signal the kind of broad threshold inquiry sought by dynamic benchmarking. By investigating each factor, the DOJ or district court should gain an accurate sense of the extent of democratic damage caused by a disaster.

First, the extent of voter displacement—a concept that includes the number of displaced voters, their geographic locations, and the projected duration of displacement—can have a direct impact on whether existing voting laws can adapt to a post-disaster election. For instance, although a jurisdiction’s strict absentee voting requirements may normally make sense as an anti-fraud mechanism, after a disaster, these once-reasonable restrictions can erect a substantial administrative barrier for displaced voters who wish to vote from afar.

Second, measuring potential damage to the infrastructure and channels of election administration can help determine whether existing laws can logistically execute a fair contest. A disaster has the potential to cause significant damage to critical infrastructure, such as the Postal Service, that voters rely upon to receive information both from the government and from candidates seeking their votes. A voting regime that relies primarily on the Postal Service to distribute voter information—and, more importantly, absentee ballots—will be hamstrung if this normally stable channel is closed or disabled after a disaster. In addition to damaging the Postal Service, disasters can also destroy the places where citizens have become accustomed to voting. The need to eliminate or consolidate polling locations can contribute to the

conclusion that existing voting plans are inadequate to maintain status quo voting power, particularly if minority voters are disproportionately affected by the damage.

Finally, a localized analysis of voting patterns, such as a racial group’s preference for certain methods of voting, can illuminate the extent to which existing voting laws would be unable to maintain minority voting power. For example, if a jurisdiction’s minority residents have historically disfavored absentee voting relative to the rest of the jurisdiction’s voters, a voting plan’s heavy reliance on absentee voting as the only alternative to traditional voting should be viewed skeptically. Of course, in the aftermath of a disaster, the DOJ may not be able to conclude that a jurisdiction’s minority voters disfavor a particular form of voting because they are racial minorities. Nevertheless, the existence of racially divergent voting preferences should itself counsel caution when considering whether a voting scheme is capable of preserving minority voting strength.

This type of multifactor analysis will not be overly burdensome for the covered jurisdictions, the DOJ, or the district court. The covered jurisdictions will be charged with producing the necessary data for the analysis but will be aided by the proliferation of data-driven studies that normally follow a major disaster. The DOJ or the district court will be responsible for conducting the inquiry, but both have consistently proved capable of digesting and synthesizing complex data pertaining to voting plans and voting groups. In particular, the DOJ, as first among equals in enforcing section 5, has deep experience with the racial dynamics in the covered jurisdictions. It can continue to rely on its informal network of elected officials and community activists for help with the intensely localized post-disaster review that dynamic benchmarking demands. Thus, although dynamic benchmarking’s threshold inquiry is not costless, it also does not pose a substantial burden.

122. Numerous post-Katrina studies were published in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. See, e.g., Kevin McCarthy et al., Rand Gulf States Policy Inst., The Repopulation of New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina (2006); Logan, supra note 7.


124. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 725 (noting the role that local stakeholders already play in advising the DOJ during its preclearance process); Donahue, supra note 54, at 1675 (“The Department maintains files with names of minority contacts in particular jurisdictions and routinely reaches out to these individuals in evaluating the likely impact of a specific change.”).
If the threshold inquiry demonstrates that the existing voting plan is an acceptable baseline for comparison, then the DOJ or district court should proceed with the traditional static benchmarking procedure. A proposed voting change can then be safely measured against the existing voting plan to detect retrogression. However, if the threshold inquiry demonstrates that the existing voting plan is in fact incapable of preserving minority voting strength, the DOJ or district court should proceed to the second step of the dynamic benchmarking model.

2. Selecting a Replacement Benchmark

The second step in the dynamic process requires the DOJ or the district court to select a replacement benchmark—a concrete voting plan that would likely preserve minority political power in a post-disaster world. Importantly, the replacement benchmark would not be a “license for the State to do whatever it deems necessary to ensure continued electoral success.”\(^{125}\) Rather, the replacement benchmark would only ensure that a minority group’s “opportunity to elect representatives of its choice not be diminished.”\(^{126}\) The distinction is slight, but important: the replacement benchmark is not a mandate to guarantee political spoils; it should only present minority voters with a realistic opportunity to avert retrogression. For example, if minority voters have historically used their political power to elect a minority representative, the replacement benchmark should be a voting plan that preserves a realistic opportunity to continue that success. It should not, however, stack the voting deck in order to turn that opportunity into an absolute certainty—a potential violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.\(^{127}\)

If a proposed voting change improves or simply maintains minority influence relative to the replacement benchmark, it warrants preclearance. But if the proposed change falls short of the replacement benchmark—for instance, by suggesting post-disaster reforms that are too modest to preserve minority power—it should be denied preclearance. Under dynamic benchmarking, the fact that a post-disaster plan is technically ameliorative no longer guarantees

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\(^{125}\) *Vera*, 517 U.S. at 983 (emphasis omitted).

\(^{126}\) *Id*.

\(^{127}\) Even though compliance with the VRA can be a compelling government interest, the state must still narrowly tailor its actions to withstand strict scrutiny. *Sweatt v. Johnson*, 319 U.S. 250, 252 (1943) (“Where a State relies on the Department’s determination that race-based districting is necessary to comply with the Act, the judiciary retains an independent obligation in adjudicating consequent equal protection challenges to ensure that the State’s actions are narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling interest.”).
preclearance. By establishing a replacement benchmark, the dynamic model only preclears voting plans that are sufficiently ameliorative.

How should the DOJ or district court go about choosing this replacement benchmark? One option that leaps to mind would set the benchmark at the level of minority voting strength in the last predisaster election. So, returning to an earlier example, if a jurisdiction’s minority voters previously elected six out of ten city council representatives, a post-disaster voting plan would be precleared only if it provided the realistic opportunity for that level of success in a post-disaster election. Intuitively simple, this practice would present the benchmark as a general goal that the jurisdiction’s procedural reforms must make possible. I nevertheless reject this option because I believe such general mandates grant undue deference to incumbent lawmakers who may have a vested interest in developing mediocre voting reforms after a disaster. A general benchmark, void of specifics, presents substantial situational ambiguity that these lawmakers can exploit. With the pressure to compromise among competing interests (not all of which are necessarily legitimate or well intentioned), incumbents may choose to present the “least best” solution to maintain minority voting strength and may scuttle better alternatives in the process. This distrust is particularly justified in the section 5 context, in which historical anxieties of potential voting discrimination still linger.

In light of this concern, I believe a more appealing and robust approach would give the DOJ or district court ultimate authority to craft a detailed replacement benchmark. Yet instead of carving a benchmark from whole cloth, my proposal would mandate that the DOJ or district court harness the expertise—and self-interest—of local stakeholders before deciding on an alternative.128 The stakeholders may include community advocates, political parties, incumbent lawmakers, candidates for elected office, and any other organized group or individual who wishes to submit a proposal for an appropriate replacement benchmark.129 Similar to amici in formal judicial

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128. Heather Gerken has envisioned a similar role for local stakeholders in her proposal to reform section 5’s administration. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 717. Though Gerken’s proposal operates in a different manner from that of this Note, the role she develops for local stakeholders is both powerful and transferable to other contexts, including dynamic benchmarking review. Though the idea of involving stakeholders in voting rights administration is relatively new, involving private parties in other areas of regulation has long been an area of innovation. See, e.g., Ian Ayres & John Braithwaite, Responsive Regulation: Transcending the Deregulation Debate (1992); Jody Freeman, Collaborative Governance in the Administrative State, 45 UCLA L. REV. 1 (1997).

129. The post-Katrina involvement of stakeholder groups suggests that, far from being disorganized after a disaster, these groups will be fully engaged in the legislative process.
proceedings, these stakeholders should be encouraged to offer concrete proposals to inform the review process. The DOJ or district court should then make those proposals available for public critique and analysis. As a formal matter, all submitted plans should be considered equally; if a covered jurisdiction wishes to submit a proposal, it should not be granted special deference. Doing so would permit jurisdictions to determine the very yardstick against which their actions would later be measured. Special deference might also discourage other stakeholders from submitting their own proposals, as it would connote a hierarchy in which they were disfavored.

Three distinct benefits would flow from openly soliciting local stakeholders’ input. First, and most practically, the DOJ or district court could use the various submissions to gather practical information on voting procedures that would be feasible in the aftermath of a disaster. The stakeholders would be likely to deploy their superior local knowledge to present procedures that were more creative and workable than what the DOJ or district court could conceive from afar. And even if the DOJ or district court did not adopt a submitted plan in its entirety, input from stakeholders would still present a menu of options from which a replacement benchmark could be derived. The DOJ already consults local stakeholders informally when considering whether to preclear voting changes. The stakeholder submission process would simply bring this consultation above ground.

Second, an open submission process could promote moderation among various stakeholders. Because the proposals would be publicly available for review, stakeholders with conflicting interests might be less likely to submit unnecessarily generous or stingy examples of a nonretrogressive plan. The built-in contrast would not, of course, synchronize the stakeholders’ conflicting interests, but it could help blunt the edges of their proposals, lest they demonstrate bad faith in front of the DOJ or district court.

Finally, consulting local stakeholders addresses the potential criticism that dynamic benchmarking might “exacerbate the ‘substantial’ federalism costs that the preclearance procedure already exacts.” The dynamic model acknowledges superior local knowledge in election administration, which is a deeply rooted fixture of federalism. It then uses the open submission process to capitalize on that knowledge and to increase the chance that the replacement

131. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 726; Donahue, supra note 54, at 1674-75.
benchmark will enjoy some measure of local “buy-in” or support. Thus, the procedure strikes a compromise: it uses local consultation to guide the DOJ or district court’s free hand as it crafts a replacement benchmark, but it also avoids overly constraining the discretion these federal actors need to ensure a post-disaster response that will maintain sufficient minority political strength. There is admittedly no perfect solution to the inherent suspicion that attends giving any government actor—federal or state—discretionary power. Yet by providing an opportunity for substantial collaboration between local stakeholders and the federal government, the open submission process encourages an outcome that reflects both local involvement and federal stewardship.

3. Exiting Dynamic Benchmarking: One Front Door, One Back Door

The mechanics of dynamic benchmarking ensure that it will be a temporary procedure. As a covered jurisdiction returns to normalcy, the extraordinary post-disaster voting laws will not automatically be used as a benchmark when new laws are submitted for preclearance. Dynamic benchmarking prescribes conducting the same two-step procedural review, querying whether the emergency voting laws are an accurate proxy for minority voting strength. Continuously scrutinizing the replacement benchmark is critical because it provides a procedural exit from the more exacting mandate that dynamic benchmarking establishes in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. As displaced residents decide to return home or to relocate permanently, and as the covered jurisdiction repairs its election infrastructure, extraordinary post-disaster voting procedures should give way to more ordinary procedures.  

To illustrate, consider a jurisdiction that responds to a disaster by automatically distributing absentee ballots to all displaced voters. Under static benchmarking, this charitable law would be enshrined as a benchmark. Any future attempt to scale it back would likely be tagged as a retrogressive change. This scenario could provide a notable disincentive to jurisdictions considering whether to adopt aggressive post-disaster voting reforms.

133. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 710 (discussing this potential to “generate bottom-up support for voting rights enforcement”).

134. Reducing the benchmark of minority voting power is not a betrayal of the retrogression standard. Displaced residents who have taken affirmative steps to relocate (for instance, by registering to vote in other states) should not be included in the VRA’s section 5 analysis. Dynamic benchmarking should not artificially attach their citizenship to communities they no longer consider home.
By contrast, under dynamic benchmarking, the jurisdiction would be allowed to recalibrate its voting procedures without running headfirst into a preclearance denial. The dynamic test’s threshold inquiry would examine whether the emergency law is still needed to preserve minority voting strength. If the absentee ballot distribution process is needed to maintain this strength, it should be kept as the proper benchmark for the analysis. If it is not so needed—for instance, because minority voters have largely returned home and can vote in person without sacrificing their status quo political power—a less demanding replacement benchmark should be developed to complete the inquiry. This is the “dynamic” core of the model I propose: rather than employing a stubbornly fixed benchmark, the model permits upward or downward adjustment to preserve minority voting strength.

Even though dynamic benchmarking provides for this “front door” procedural escape from the model’s high post-disaster standard, an inherent limitation leaves open a “back door”: a jurisdiction may avoid the procedure’s heightened mandate altogether by leaving its voting laws unchanged. This alternative “exit” results from a simple truth about section 5: while the provision has long maintained the coercive power to influence a jurisdiction that is taking action, section 5 is not equipped to combat the danger of inaction. In other words, section 5 cannot force a jurisdiction to pass a law; it can only grant or deny preclearance to laws that have already been enacted. The democratic process can potentially deter such recalcitrant behavior ex ante or punish it ex post, but in communities that might reward defiance, other tools in the voting rights arsenal, such as section 2 of the VRA, will have to take the lead when a jurisdiction opts to leave its laws unchanged after a disaster. Though section 2 currently lacks well-developed doctrine to address this kind of tactic, a discerning court would almost certainly view such calculated inaction harshly and might be willing to declare that, without reform, the existing voting laws impermissibly diluted minority voters’ ability to “participate in the political process and to elect representatives of their choice.” Thus, exploiting this limitation in dynamic benchmarking would be a high stakes game for a covered jurisdiction and would likely present a classic Hobson’s choice: forced to decide between leaving its voting laws unchanged (a high-risk, low-payoff option) and conforming to the mandate of dynamic

135. I am indebted to Natalie Hershlag for helpful conversations on this point.
136. See supra note 104.
137. 42 U.S.C. § 1973(b) (2000). Indeed, the potential that the Louisiana State Legislature would leave its voting laws unchanged formed the basis of Judge Lemelle’s repeated threats to intervene and “to take over [the] elections”—presumably by finding that Louisiana had violated section 2 of the VRA. Shuler, supra note 83.
benchmarking, a jurisdiction would likely opt to reform its laws and obtain preclearance.

B. Support for Dynamic Benchmarking

Dynamic benchmarking is an attractive alternative because it fits easily within the firmly rooted mechanics of section 5 preclearance and makes alterations to the existing process only when needed to return section 5 to its intended strength in the aftermath of a disaster. Although the model offers an original approach to section 5 enforcement, it finds substantial support in the VRA's legislative history and in previous departures from static benchmarking. This support, in turn, would insulate the proposal from adverse judicial review if Congress embraced dynamic benchmarking as an alternative to the static test.

1. Legislative History

As discussed earlier, the Beer Court used the VRA's legislative history to justify the retrogression standard. The Beer majority referenced a single passage from a House of Representatives report that framed the section 5 inquiry around whether minority political power was "augmented, diminished, or not affected" by a proposed voting change. Thus, the identification of a retrogressive law rested on movement in minority power. The Court relied on static benchmarking to detect this movement, later asserting that the test flowed "by definition" from the logic of retrogression.

Yet the same congressional report that the Beer Court referenced did not endorse static benchmarking as the only way to detect retrogression. Indeed, the House report explicitly encouraged an inquiry that went beyond whether minority political power was augmented, diminished, or not affected by a proposed voting change. Read in full, the report specifically commands that the inquiry be conducted "in view of the political, sociological, economic, and psychological circumstances within the community proposing the change."

Although omitted from the Beer Court’s opinion, this language supports a more nuanced approach to detecting retrogression. Dynamic benchmarking

138. See supra Section I.B.
140. Id. at 141 (emphasis omitted) (quoting H.R. REP. NO. 94-196, at 60 (1975)).
offers such an approach by accounting for potentially disparate circumstances before determining whether a proposed law will increase, decrease, or maintain minority voting power. Static benchmarking, by contrast, has never aspired to incorporate broad-based factors into its analysis. I offer this expanded reading of the House report not to rehash old debates about the Beer Court’s curious treatment of a thin slice of legislative history, but rather to engage the Court on its own terms. Drawing support from the same source used to validate the original retrogression standard highlights dynamic benchmarking’s appeal as a justifiable addition to section 5 and encourages Congress to view the procedure as a logical extension, not a rejection, of Court precedent.

2. Previous Departures from Static Benchmarking

The adoption of the dynamic model would not be the first departure from the static benchmarking test. The static test has been notably shelved in three previous scenarios when existing voting laws failed to provide an appropriate benchmark for comparison.

First, in *Mississippi v. Smith*, the district court held that an existing voting plan should not be used as a benchmark for comparison when the plan has been declared unconstitutional. Instead, the court asserted, a court-ordered plan drawn in the absence of a workable existing plan should become the proper benchmark for section 5 preclearance. The use of the court-ordered plan meant that the State of Mississippi could be denied preclearance for a proposed plan that, while ameliorative compared to its existing (unconstitutional) plan, was retrogressive when compared to the court-ordered plan. The court went on to state that “[i]t would be entirely inconsistent with the teaching of Beer to suggest that the Court must accept a statutory plan that increases black voting strength to a lesser degree than a court-ordered plan in effect.” The court-ordered plan in *Smith* thus resembles the dynamic

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143. Jurists and commentators alike have long criticized the Beer Court’s treatment of the VRA’s legislative history. Justice Souter, joined by Justices Stevens, Ginsburg, and Breyer, in *Bossier Parish II* sharply commented that the Beer Court “sought to justify the imposition of a nontextual limitation [on section 5] . . . by relying on a single fragment of legislative history.” 528 U.S. 320, 363 (2000) (Souter, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). He went on to call the Beer Court’s reliance on the House report “an act of distorting selectivity.” Id.; see also Katz, supra note 64, at 1198.


145. See id. at 1333.

146. See id.

147. Id.
procedure’s replacement benchmark, and the court’s holding supports the
notion that preclearance can be denied if a proposed plan appears retrogressive
compared to a replacement benchmark.

Second, in *Wilkes County v. United States*, the three-judge district court
again departed from static benchmarking because the county’s existing voting
plan was malapportioned. The county, which was 47% black, sought
 preclearance of its plan to replace its existing single-member districts with an
at-large voting scheme. The district court rejected the county’s argument
that the change was not technically retrogressive because black voters were
effectively prevented from electing candidates of their choice under the existing
single-member districting plan. The court reasoned that “[s]ince the existing
districts are severely malapportioned, it is appropriate, in measuring the effect
of the voting changes, to compare the voting changes with options for properly
apportioned single-member district plans.” Thus, because the existing
voting plan was malapportioned, the *Wilkes County* court was willing to apply a
replacement benchmark against which a proposed plan would be measured.
Like *Smith*, this case demonstrates that *Beer* does not mandate that the DOJ or
the district court use an existing voting plan as a benchmark if doing so would
undermine the purposes of the retrogression standard.

Finally, in *City of Richmond v. United States*, the Supreme Court permitted
a limited departure from static benchmarking when faced with a proposed
annexation. Broadly speaking, an annexation—the incorporation of new
territory into a political entity—qualifies as the kind of change covered by
section 5 preclearance because of its potential to cause a retrogression in
minority political strength. For instance, a city may choose to annex new
territory with predominately white voters to reduce the relative strength of its
black voters.

*City of Richmond* presented a situation in which the annexation of new
territory reduced Richmond’s 52% black majority to a 42% black minority.
Under Richmond’s at-large system of elections, and with Richmond’s
citizens voting almost exclusively along racial lines, the change meant that
black candidates would be unable to win elections in the post-annexation city.

149. See Laughlin McDonald, *Racial Fairness—Why Shouldn’t It Apply to Section 5 of the Voting
151. 422 U.S. 358 (1975).
152. Id. at 363.
153. See supra note 44 and accompanying text.
The Court recognized this potential retrogression but also acknowledged that the static benchmarking test would automatically “forbid all such annexations,”\(^\text{154}\) even if a jurisdiction had a legitimate reason to seek new territory. The Court’s desire to permit the “natural” growth associated with annexations was thus in direct tension with its duty to protect minority voting strength under section 5.

Faced with this quandary, the Court abandoned static benchmarking altogether and struck a compromise that would permit the annexation only if the city agreed to reform its at-large voting scheme and to adopt a ward system that would give black candidates the chance to win elections in majority-black districts.\(^\text{155}\) The Court refused to use the city’s existing voting plan as a benchmark because any annexation would appear retrogressive in comparison; in its place, the Court employed the compromise plan. If the city refused to adopt the single-member districts envisioned in this replacement benchmark, its proposed annexation would be denied preclearance. But if the city adopted the basket of reforms contained in the replacement benchmark, its proposed annexation would be granted preclearance.\(^\text{156}\)

Read together, \textit{Smith, Wilkes County}, and \textit{City of Richmond} indicate a judicial willingness to depart from static benchmarking when the existing voting plan is an inappropriate basis for comparison. The dynamic benchmarking procedure that I propose shares the underlying rationale of these cases, which thereby provide it with a strong foundation of court precedent that will help it withstand judicial scrutiny.

\textbf{C. Applying Dynamic Benchmarking to Post-Katrina Louisiana}

How would the dynamic benchmarking test have assessed Louisiana’s post-Katrina voting plan? Most indications suggest that the procedure would have led to a preclearance denial. Under the first step of the dynamic test, the DOJ (or district court) would have reviewed the existing voting laws to determine whether the laws could preserve minority voting strength after the disaster. Evidence such as the extensive voter displacement, damage to the Postal Service and polling locations, and minority voters’ historic aversion to

\(^{154}\) \textit{City of Richmond}, 422 U.S. at 371.

\(^{155}\) See \textit{id.} at 369-70.

\(^{156}\) Although \textit{City of Richmond} predates \textit{Beer} by a year, the Court has consistently applied this flexible test when faced with section 5 annexation questions. See, e.g., \textit{City of Port Arthur v. United States}, 459 U.S. 159, 167 (1982); \textit{City of Rome v. United States}, 446 U.S. 156, 186 (1980).
traditional mail-based forms of absentee voting would likely have led the DOJ to conclude that the existing voting plan was too broken to be used as a benchmark. It was beyond dispute that a post-Katrina election held under the pre-Katrina voting plan would have rendered minority voters decidedly worse off in terms of political power.

Under the second step of the dynamic test—finding an appropriate replacement for the broken benchmark—the DOJ would have solicited the input of stakeholders who had attempted to influence the Louisiana State Legislature’s crafting of the emergency voting plan. By seeking their input, the DOJ would have given these stakeholders an equal voice in lawmaking, resurrecting ideas that might have been dismissed in the legislative process and freeing them from the pressure to bargain from a position of weakness.

For Louisiana, the solicitation process inevitably would have focused attention on the major flash point in the post-Katrina debate: whether out-of-state satellite voting was necessary to prevent retrogression in minority political power. Major civil rights groups had vigorously lobbied the legislature and sought to convince the public that out-of-state satellite voting should be the cornerstone of any post-Katrina voting plan. But the legislature instead opted for more conventional tactics to accommodate displaced voters. Dynamic benchmarking would nevertheless have empowered the DOJ to determine whether satellite voting was a necessary plank in a post-disaster voting plan. All sides of the debate would have had the opportunity to make their case in the open submission process before the DOJ reached its decision.

157. See Thevenot & Williams, supra note 99 (noting pronounced post-Katrina distrust of absentee balloting among African-Americans). Before Katrina, in Orleans Parish, which includes the city of New Orleans and the majority of black voters, only 3.3% of all votes cast in the 2004 presidential election were by absentee ballot. See La. Sec’y of State, Election Results by Precinct-Official, Results for Election Date: 11/02/04 Presidential Electors, Orleans Parish, http://www.sos.louisiana.gov:8090/cgibin/?rqstyp=elcmpct&rqsdta=1102040101714136 (last visited Feb. 5, 2007). This percentage is low compared to that in other states. See David Kimball & Martha Kropf, Early and Absentee Voting and Unrecorded Votes in the 2002 Midterm Election 23 (2004), http://www.umsl.edu/~kimballd/mpsa04kk.pdf.

158. This failure to enact out-of-state satellite voting may reflect the fact that the era of “normal politics” has not yet arrived in Louisiana. See Gerken, supra note 65, at 709 (defining “normal politics” as a world in which “racial minorities finally wield enough power in the political process to protect themselves”); see also Pildes, supra note 33, at 97 (suggesting that we have reached the “normal, pluralist interest group politics to which the VRA aspired”). Minority voters may still be “discrete and insular” participants in the political process, requiring vigilant protection under section 5 to avoid consistent defeat. United States v. Carolene Prods. Co., 304 U.S. 144, 152 n.4 (calling for a “more searching judicial inquiry” for “discrete and insular minorities”). Alternatively, the demise of satellite voting could reflect a flaw in the proposal.
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Informed by the available post-Katrina data and liberated from static benchmarking’s rigid constraints, the DOJ would likely have concluded that satellite voting, or an equally robust reform, was necessary to avoid retrogression.\footnote{The DOJ’s concession that Louisiana “may well have done more under the circumstances” shows its awareness that Louisiana opted against more drastic steps to preserve minority voting strength. Letter from William E. Moschella to Rep. John Conyers, Jr., supra note 109, at 3.} With a demanding replacement benchmark in place, Louisiana would have been required to adopt further remedies to reduce the likelihood that minority influence would wane after Katrina. A proposed plan that did not meet this mandate would have been rejected out of hand.

This conclusion is supported by data from the 2006 New Orleans municipal elections. The percentage of black voters in the city’s electorate dropped from 63% in the 2002 municipal elections to 57% in 2006.\footnote{John R. Logan, Population Displacement and Post-Katrina Politics: The New Orleans Mayoral Race, 2006, at 1 (June 1, 2006), http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report2.pdf.} Although at first glance this decline might not appear precipitous, it is a historically “substantial” shift for a city the size of New Orleans.\footnote{Brian Thevenot, Flood-Ravaged Neighborhoods May Lose Clout, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), May 2, 2006, at A1 (quoting John Logan).} In addition, a more granular look at the election data reveals deeply troubling traces of retrogression.

The first disquieting trend shown in the data is that, although overall voter participation declined between 2002 and 2006, the New Orleans electorate shrank primarily due to the nonparticipation of black voters displaced by Katrina.\footnote{See Adam Nossiter, Vote for Mayor Points to Change in New Orleans, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 24, 2006, at A1.} District-level data reveal that, after Katrina, voting rates among these minority voters plummeted. For instance, in the predominately black Lower Ninth Ward, voter participation declined by nearly 40%.\footnote{Logan, supra note 160, at 1.} New Orleans East, another predominantly minority neighborhood, experienced a 23% decline in participation.\footnote{Id.} Similar declines appeared in other predominantly minority neighborhoods with substantial populations of displaced citizens. By contrast, in majority-white neighborhoods that endured massive devastation, such as Lakeview, voter turnout was generally stable relative to 2002, declining only 6.4%, an outcome that may reflect existing

\footnotetext[159]{The DOJ’s concession that Louisiana “may well have done more under the circumstances” shows its awareness that Louisiana opted against more drastic steps to preserve minority voting strength. Letter from William E. Moschella to Rep. John Conyers, Jr., supra note 109, at 3.}
\footnotetext[161]{Brian Thevenot, Flood-Ravaged Neighborhoods May Lose Clout, TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans), May 2, 2006, at A1 (quoting John Logan).}
\footnotetext[162]{See Adam Nossiter, Vote for Mayor Points to Change in New Orleans, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 24, 2006, at A1.}
\footnotetext[163]{Logan, supra note 160, at 1.}
\footnotetext[164]{Id.}
disparities among the displaced. In majority-white neighborhoods with minimal disaster damage, such as the French Quarter, voter turnout increased by 22.5% compared to 2002.

Table 1.
2006 VOTER TURNOUT IN SELECT MAJORITY-BLACK AND MAJORITY-WHITE DISTRICTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT NAME</th>
<th>TOTAL VOTES 2006</th>
<th>% OF 2002 TOTAL</th>
<th>% DAMAGED</th>
<th>% BLACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority-Black Districts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bywater</td>
<td>7435</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Ninth Ward</td>
<td>3360</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-City</td>
<td>11,826</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans East</td>
<td>17,448</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>86.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority-White Districts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Quarter</td>
<td>2106</td>
<td>122.5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakeview</td>
<td>9799</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uptown-Carrollton</td>
<td>20,691</td>
<td>103.8</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implications of this sharp divergence in political participation are potentially severe. John Logan, a Brown University sociologist and preeminent authority on post-Katrina demographics, concluded that “neighborhoods with the highest electoral participation have likely strengthened their hands in the battles over public investment and development planning that are sure to be a...
major feature of local politics in the next several years.” Speaking to the Times-Picayune, Logan sounded a more dire warning:

People have interests tied to specific territories. If you happen to be an African-American in the French Quarter, your vote doesn’t have the same impact as an African-American in eastern New Orleans [where storm damage was severe]. . . . The Lower 9th Ward and New Orleans East were very under-represented in the election. . . . I firmly believe that as decisions are made about allocating resources, that the resources will follow the votes. Politicians don’t usually serve the city or the public as a whole; they have to be concerned about how they’re going to maintain an electoral majority.

Thus, a steep decline in minority participation may preface a tremendous decline in minority voters’ ability to hold sway in the political process—a factor that Justice O’Connor deemed to be directly relevant in determining the existence of retrogression.

A second unsettling trend seen in the data is that minority voters attempted to avoid a reduction in their longstanding political dominance by retreating into racial camps and voting along racial lines. Indeed, it is difficult to explain the sudden shift in black voting preferences any other way. The eventual victor, the black incumbent Mayor, Ray Nagin, went from receiving less than 40% of the black vote in 2002 to being favored by 80% of black voters in 2006, when he was paired against a white challenger, Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu. Nagin’s support among white voters, by contrast, plummeted from 84% in 2002 to 20% in 2006. According to Logan, this “sea change in the composition of support for [Nagin]” was a “countervailing force” that blunted the impact of widespread minority voter displacement. Rather than support the election of a progressive white mayor, black voters instead

168. Id. at 12.
169. Thevenot, supra note 161 (quoting Logan).
170. See Georgia v. Ashcroft, 539 U.S. 461, 479 (2003). Though Congress overturned Ashcroft’s central holding in its recent reauthorization of the VRA, it limited its abrogation of Ashcroft to the redistricting context. See S. Rep. No. 109-295, at 15 (2006) (“With regard to redistricting plans, [the reauthorized VRA] protect[s] naturally occurring districts that have a clear majority of minority voters.”). Parts of Ashcroft arguably remain good law, including its implication that a decline in minority influence over substantive decision-making is an indication of retrogression. See Ashcroft, 539 U.S. at 482.
171. Tidmore, supra note 5.
172. Id.
consolidated their votes behind a conservative black incumbent whom they had previously disfavored. 174 Although this type of racial bloc voting is not—by itself—a sign of retrogression, its reappearance represents a retreat from progress and a step backwards from the type of cross-racial understanding the Court has consistently identified as the goal of the VRA. 175

Table 2.
NAGIN VOTE SHARE BY DISTRICT 176

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT NAME</th>
<th>% OF REGISTERED VOTERS SUPPORTING NAGIN</th>
<th>TOTAL % OF BLACK REGISTERED VOTERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority-Black Districts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bywater</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Ninth Ward</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-City</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans East</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority-White Districts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Quarter</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakeview</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uptown-Carrollton</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than six months after the 2006 municipal elections, and only one year since Katrina made landfall, it is still too early to catalogue the full extent of minority voters’ post-Katrina decline in political power. I present this post-election data only to support my earlier assertion that the DOJ justifiably could have predicted that Louisiana’s emergency voting plan would not provide minority voters with a realistic opportunity to avoid retrogression. Admittedly, given the extent of devastation and displacement caused by Katrina, it might have been impossible for any set of voting procedures to avoid an absolute

174. See Kim Cobb & Kristen Mack, Nagin Revels in His Unconventional Win, HOUSTON CHRON. May 22, 2006, http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/front/3878784.html (“Nagin is a pro-business, conservative Democrat who has been known to support Republican candidates. Landrieu, on the other hand, is a liberal Democrat of the old school . . . .”).

175. See, e.g., Ashcroft, 539 U.S. at 490.

176. See supra note 167.
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decline in minority voting strength. Under the worst circumstances, even the most accommodating post-disaster jurisdiction might have only realistically hoped to minimize retrogression.\textsuperscript{177} Yet two larger points remain. First, as the DOJ stated, Louisiana “may well have done more under the circumstances” to accommodate displaced citizens.\textsuperscript{178} Second, because of static benchmarking’s inability to operate effectively after a disaster, section 5 would have been powerless to prevent Louisiana from doing even less to preserve minority voting strength. Only a procedure like dynamic benchmarking could have compelled the state to adopt further reforms.

CONCLUSION

With Hurricane Katrina as a tragic backdrop, this Note has endeavored to illuminate a crucial shortcoming in section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. The cornerstone of section 5’s preclearance process—the static benchmarking test—is incapable of protecting minority voting power in the aftermath of a disaster. The procedure’s “sixth-grade” arithmetic proved inappropriate in a post-disaster world that demanded a more complex calculus. Section 5 is not, however, unconditionally wedded to static benchmarking; as I have shown, both its legislative history and case law support an alternative approach, such as the dynamic benchmarking test offered by this Note.

Although the Court has thus far played a dominant role in defining the scope of section 5, dynamic benchmarking is ideally a congressional innovation. Two considerations—one tactical, one normative—justify a legislative strategy. First, while a sympathetic court could read dynamic benchmarking into section 5, minority voters lack standing to prompt judicial intervention under the provision.\textsuperscript{179} To get into court, a jurisdiction would have to opt for judicial preclearance of its post-disaster laws, a highly unlikely choice given the time and expense required by that alternative.\textsuperscript{180}

Second, while Katrina-like disasters are inherently unpredictable and are likely to be rare, this is no excuse for inaction. Waiting until the next

\textsuperscript{177} The dynamic model I propose recognizes this reality by mandating only that a jurisdiction design a plan that provides minority voters with their best opportunity to avoid retrogression, not a plan that guarantees its avoidance altogether. See supra Subsection III.A.2. Section 5 cannot plausibly mandate that a covered jurisdiction do more without stretching the provision beyond its constitutional limitations. See supra note 127.

\textsuperscript{178} Letter from William E. Moschella to Rep. John Conyers, Jr., supra note 109, at 3.

\textsuperscript{179} Cf. Way, supra note 106, at 1443 n.17 (“[I]n contrast to actions under § 5, cases under § 2 can be initiated by private parties in addition to the Justice Department.”).

\textsuperscript{180} See supra note 70.
catastrophe to act on lessons learned from past disasters is illogical. Hoping instead that there will not be another disaster implicating section 5 is simply imprudent. In the spirit of the vigorous debate in the legal academy on emergency constitutionalism,\textsuperscript{181} Congress should approve the dynamic model as a legitimate alternative to static benchmarking—before the next disaster strikes. Congress may choose to revisit the recently reauthorized section 5 altogether,\textsuperscript{182} which would provide an opportunity to consider a limited innovation like dynamic benchmarking.

Ultimately, congressional action to adopt dynamic benchmarking will simply modernize—not revolutionize—section 5. The proposal admittedly weaves new doctrine into an old quilt, but this intentional modesty further justifies the proposal. It demonstrates that dynamic benchmarking is no stalking horse for a permanent expansion of section 5; instead, the model purposefully echoes the simple request made by countless Katrina survivors that their hard-fought political power not recede with the flood waters. In other words, these survivors asked for nothing more than to be protected against retrogression in their political power. That level of protection has long been section 5’s central promise. Dynamic benchmarking seeks only to make it unconditional, come hell or high water.
