The American Anthropological Association (AAA) is deeply dismayed by the US Supreme Court’s ruling on Tuesday that, by a narrow 5-4 vote, struck down a key part of the Voting Rights Act. First enacted in 1965, the Voting Rights Act was initially aimed at preventing reprehensible practices that stopped African Americans from voting, most common in the American South. The law eventually imposed federal oversight over nine states—Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia — requiring them to seek preapproval for any changes in election laws (e.g., voter identification measures, redistricting maps, and rules related to the mechanics of elections like polling hours).

Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts argued that any remedies to injustice must rely on current data concerning practices in the aforementioned states, rather than historical conditions that the law originally sought to eliminate. In her dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg observed that the effectiveness of the Voting Rights Act is what led to its demise. She wrote:

> Demand for a record of violations equivalent to the one earlier made would expose Congress to a catch-22. If the statute was working, there would be less evidence of discrimination, so opponents might argue that Congress should not be allowed to renew the statute. In contrast, if the statute was not working, there would be plenty of evidence of discrimination, but scant reason to renew a failed regulatory regime.

The Voting Rights Act was one of many legislative responses to the Civil Rights Movement, which encompassed an ongoing struggle to gain equality and justice in the US. Over several decades, lives were tragically lost and property destroyed in pursuit of equal opportunity. The Civil Rights Movement generated other social movements that have transformed U.S. society and culture. Over the past century, anthropologists have been deeply involved in the study of African-American and Latino communities and have made significant contributions to the scholarship on race, class, and inequality.

AAA President, Dr. Leith Mullings observed, “Despite significant progress, there is much work to be done, and it is important to remain vigilant about the regressive effects of voter identification measures and redistricting. For the Supreme Court to deny the important role that legal protections have played in recent history flies in the face of anthropologists’ scholarship on poverty, social justice, and racial inequality.”

Founded in 1902, the AAA now has more than 12,000 members worldwide. The Association is dedicated to the study of humankind in all its aspects, to the dissemination of anthropological knowledge, and to the use of this knowledge in solving human problems.