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## Social Work, Democracy, and the Future of Voting Rights

Cite this podcast – Sobota, P. (Host). (2026, June 16). Social Work, Democracy, and the Future of Voting Rights (No. 349) [Audio podcast episode]. In inSocialWork. University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

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**Peter Sobota** [00:00:10] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, it's good to have you along everybody. A quick personal note, I'll be retiring from our faculty and ending my role with the podcast after 18 years of podcasts. At the end I'll make a brief so long if you would like to hear it. I'll miss you and the podcast. Today we're examining a topic that sits at the intersection of democracy, civil rights, public policy, and the social work profession itself. That's the recent Supreme Court decisions that many legal scholars and civil rights advocates argue have significantly weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965. All brought to a recent head by the court's April 2026 ruling in Louisiana versus Callais. The court's 6-3 decision invalidated Louisiana's congressional map containing a second-majority black district and even more consequentially substantially narrowed how federal voting rights protections apply to redistricting disputes. One rationale that was given was essentially that racism is not as bad as it's been in the past. For many Americans, voting rights may seem primarily like a legal or political issue, but for social workers, questions of representation, civil participation, access to power, and equitable public policy are deeply connected to the profession's core values and ethics. Who has political voice and who does not shapes decisions about housing, schools, healthcare, mental health services, child welfare systems, disability services, environmental justice, public safety, and economic opportunity. Our guest today, Sunny Harris Rome, MSW JD, is uniquely qualified to lay out the legal implications in here and here and also provide a social work perspective and the likely impacts on our broader society. Sunny Harris Rome is Professor Emerita of Social Work at the George in University. And a quick postscript. On the day we recorded our interview with Sunny Rome, Alabama submitted changes to their congressional map to the Supreme Court. And on June 2nd, about a week later, the Supreme court ruled in their favor. Hi, Sunny, and welcome to InSocialWork.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:02:53] Thank you

**Peter Sobota** [00:02:54] Thank you for coming out of a life of so-called leisure to do our podcast. We really appreciate it. We, let me just kind of frame things a little bit to begin here. We know that not everyone out there, including social workers, are following election laws really closely. But today, I think what we probably both wanna argue is that we can't afford not to at this point. So in late April of 26, we're recording, by the way, on the 29th of May. The U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in Louisiana versus, is it Callais or Cala?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:03:42] Callais.

**Peter Sobota** [00:03:44] Callais, okay. And almost immediately a landmark decision about congressional redistricting, racial gerrymandering, and the the scope of section two, which we'll get into of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The court made a 6-3 decision, shockingly along parting lines, and invalidated Louisiana's congressional map that contained a second majority black district and substantially narrowed how federal voting rights protections applied in redistricting disputes. So, we want to find out what's different now. In short, I think what the court just did is that they ruled that Louisiana's second majority black congressional district was a non-unconstitutional racial gerrymander, I'm trying to say this with a straight face, and held that complying with section two did not justify the state's race-conscious districting in that case. (*Sarcastic*) So. You know, I guess racism isn't that bad. So, Sunny, we're turning to you to help us learn and think about what's going on and how this is going to affect the populations that social workers serve and what responsibilities do we have in our response? So we hope that you're up to this dilemma.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:05:19] Well, we'll see.

**Peter Sobota** [00:05:21] Yes. For people who can't see Sunny, she is laughing, but I think good-heartedly. Did you want to say something, Sunny?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:05:29] Just that before we actually zero in on the case and on Section 2, I just wanted to give a little background about the Voting Rights Act to kind of position us for discussion at this visit.

**Peter Sobota** [00:05:43] So the big picture, go, yeah, go please go right ahead. Jump right in.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:05:47] Um, so I'm going to take us all the way back to the 15th amendment to the constitution, um, which was passed in 18, 1870, which enshrined the right to vote for African Americans. Okay. Um, what happened subsequently, particularly in the southern states, is that because they couldn't now outright prohibit voting by African Americans, they found all kinds of workarounds to make it virtually impossible for African Americans to register and to vote. So they enacted things like poll taxes, right, charging exorbitant fees in order for people to vote African-American people specifically. They implemented literacy tests and I don't know, Peter, if you've seen any of these, I suggest your readers look online because you can find examples of them and whether or not one past was at the discretion of the white administrator. So, you know, there was nothing objective about the administration of these tests. I actually found one online that I gave to my graduate students, and they were unable to pass it in the amount of time that was given. Yeah, pretty amazing. And, you know, just outright intimidation, violence that kept African Americans from registering and from voting. Fast forward quite a bit to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, right? Whose actual primary agenda was to register African-Americans in the South to vote. Right. And some of the listeners might be familiar with freedom summer when more than a thousand young people from the North were bused down to the South. Largely to Mississippi, where the problem was worst, to register African Americans to vote. It turned out to be a very dangerous proposition. There was a very high profile murder of three of the volunteers. This was followed by really the immediate catalyst for the Voting Rights Act. Which was what we call Bloody Sunday, the march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, right, from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, which was met with horrific violence, injury and death to many of the participants. And what was noteworthy was that this was an era when having televisions was becoming popular. And so unlike in previous eras, all of these confrontations and violence were televised across the country, which built enormous empathy, which build outrage. There was a lot of

pressure, which drove then President Johnson to do something and the something that he did was the Voting Rights Act. And the Voting Rights Act. That goes further than the 15th amendment in making sure guaranteeing that African Americans, other racial minorities, people of minority language communities all have an equal chance to vote an equal chance to be represented in government. So it was a fairly sweeping law that included a lot of practical measures to make sure that those guarantees would be realized. So that's sort of how we got to the voting rights amendment. And I just want to add that it was always, historically... It was reauthorized numerous times over the years, always by sweeping majorities in both houses of Congress. But things in more recent years have taken a very different turn.

**Peter Sobota** [00:10:35] Yes. And actually the, and some of that historical background, it's my understanding that the, that the law was actually strengthened and revised to kind of, you know, give people a chance to, to challenge and to, and to protect the rights that were here in the original act. But I think we're going to get to that. I'm going to ask you at some point to to opine on whether or not you think it's successful or not. But in what is in the news. Today here in late May is this decision by the Supreme Court that didn't, you know, it didn't eliminate section two, but it really kind of narrowed it. So let's get folks a little more narrowly oriented to what you just said here. Can you talk, can you tell us what is section two of the VRA, and what was it really? You know, trying to accomplish.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:11:45] So, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, the VRA, is often thought of as kind of the heart of the Voting rights act. And it does a couple of things, right? It prohibits denying or abridging the right to vote on the basis of race, color, or membership in a language minority group.

**Peter Sobota** [00:12:13] Okay.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:12:14] And it also guarantees that members, every member of one of those groups has an equal opportunity, equal to all others, both to vote and to elect representatives of their choosing, which is very relevant to the case that we're going to talk about now. So you can see how much further it goes than just saying African Americans have the right to vote.

**Peter Sobota** [00:12:45] Right Exactly. Yeah. And and and part of what I think they've done is they've really narrowed how the challenges get enacted. Is that fair to say that you used to be able to say if you were making a challenge, you could you could demonstrate results, you could show how people were affected and say this is unjust. Is it fair to say now that they've switched that from kind of, I don't know how to talk about it other than results, but now you have to prove discrimination and that smells like it's really hard to do.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:13:29] Well, you're absolutely right. And it's not just proving discrimination. I'll just be a little more precise.

**Peter Sobota** [00:13:36] Yeah, that's good.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:13:39] Intentional race discrimination. In other words that Well, I'm gonna back up if that's okay. Yeah. Yeah, please just kind of lay some groundwork about Gerrymandering and redistricting so that all of this makes sense. Perfect. Okay. All right. So this is a redistricting case Redistricting as I'm sure everybody knows right that that For purposes of electing who represents us, both in Congress and in our state legislatures, the state map is divided into districts, and you vote for the candidates in your

district. Every 10 years after the census, these maps are redrawn, the boundaries of where these districts are, in order to reflect Bye-bye.

**Peter Sobota** [00:14:32] I'm sorry for interrupting, but I had to comment on the after the census comment though. That's really old school Sunny. That says it's nice

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:14:41] That's right. Well, that's the way it traditionally has been done to reflect shifts in population. Okay, that whole thing has now been turned on its head. But, and each state has its own method of who gets to make these decisions, right? In some states, there's either a non-partisan commission or a bipartisan commission. In some States, the legislatures draw the maps. In some states, political appointees draw the maps. It's different in every state. And the reason you were laughing, of course, for our listeners' benefit is that President Trump has urged red states to redraw their maps before the next census, which is permissible. It just had not been routinely done. And now we've got this huge contest going on. With more and more states redrawing their maps. Texas redrew its map, California to canter redrew it's map, right, to sort of balance the scales, try to balance the scales on how many Republican versus Democratic representatives were added, and now many states are in the mix. I live in Virginia, which has had quite the battle royale, only drawing its map. So yeah, now, you know, that does feel old school to just happen after the census.

**Peter Sobota** [00:16:16] And by the way, just to pile on here, I just read today's Friday. On Wednesday, I read in the paper that Alabama has jumped in, that they lost a federal case, and they're going to the Supreme Court. Yeah, and they are going to use this decision to probably prevail, would be my hunch. But sorry, I interrupted.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:16:35] No, that's quite all right. So okay, so gerrymandering. So gerrymandering is when you deliberately manipulate the redistricting process to either magnify or dilute political power, right, to make some group more powerful or make some group less powerful. And it actually is thought I thought this was interesting. Thought to go back as far as 1789, so this is nothing new, when Patrick Henry drew district lines to favor James Monroe over James Madison. And the term gerrymander was coined in 1812, when the governor of Massachusetts, whose name was Elbridge Gary or Jerry, approved a map that advantaged Republicans. And one district was so oddly shaped in order to do that, that a political cartoonist thought that district resembled a salamander. So the term gerrymander is a mashup between the governor's and a salamander, gerrymander.

**Peter Sobota** [00:17:54] Didn't know that. See, this is good.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:17:56] So suffice it to say that gerrymandering has become another way of not prohibiting racial minorities from voting, but diluting the impact of their votes. Okay. Because to elect a representative of their choice, they would need to be in the majority in a district. And so this, where we draw the lines, influences. Population centers. When we talk about diluting political power through gerrymandering, states use two strategies. And the courts use these terms a lot, so I just wanted to mention them. One is packing, which means drawing districts to contain as large a concentration as possible. Of a particular group. So let's say you wanted to dilute the voting power of African Americans, you would try to corral them all within one or a limited number of districts so that they might prevail in those districts, but you could pretty much guarantee that they'd be a minority in all the other districts and therefore other candidates, right, would prevail. And the other is kind of inversing, which is called cracking. Which is when you spread draw districts so that let's say African Americans as our example are spread out as much

as possible so that again there's no district in which they can prevail because they're in the majority. Okay so we either concentrate them or we spread them out but the goal in either case is to dilute the power of their vote by keeping them in the minority within a district. Okay, so those are kind of the two ways that this is done. So the Cal-A decision.

**Peter Sobota** [00:20:11] Yeah!

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:20:11] Mentioned just a month right ago. Overall you know you were absolutely right that it greatly curtails the opportunity to prove a violation of the Voting Rights Act or to get an appropriate remedy if you do prove that there's been a violation. This is kind of an odd case, and the legal reasoning is kind complicated. So I don't want to get too much in the weeds. Just try to make it as clear as I can, and you'll let me know, I'm sure, if this is not.

**Peter Sobota** [00:20:57] No, and I want you to do that because, you know, again, I'm not the expert here, but my limited understanding of this is that this decision, I think, can be looked at two ways. What's it going to do legally? And then what does it mean for its impact on people? Yeah, so feel free to frame this however you'd like to help us understand that.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:21:20] We'll start with the legal, right? Kind of get that out of the way. Okay, so what happened here was that back in 2022, the state of Louisiana redrew its congressional map and a federal judge ruled that the map likely violated the Voting Rights Act because it needed a second majority black district. Right, that the, this was, you know, that the black vote was too diluted, that it, based on its population and its African-American population, it really needed to have another majority black district, so it sent Louisiana back to the drawing board. Louisiana redrew its map to comply with the Voting Rights Act. It was challenged, the one with the second majority Black district. And that challenge took it all the way up to, eventually, to the Supreme Court to the case that was decided just recently. And the court threw out the new map, the Supreme Court, saying that, as you indicated, that the Voting Rights Act, in fact, didn't require. A second majority Black district, and in drawing one, Louisiana had violated the Equal Protection Act of the Constitution. Okay. So the Equals Protection Act- Yeah.

**Peter Sobota** [00:23:05] I was, yeah, say a tiny bit more about that, please.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:23:08] Equal Protection Act prohibits basically race discrimination, discrimination on the basis of a number of things, one of which is race. Basically saying that only under really exceptional circumstances is it permissible to treat people differently based on their race. Okay, so if you think about it... That you're not permitted to treat people differently on the basis of race, and it was passed during Reconstruction. So we know that its purpose was really to enfranchise newly freed slaves, right? So that was the idea at the time. Things have morphed since then, But that was the idea. But the whole Voting Rights Act is premised on race. Right? So the Voting Rights Act had always been viewed as an exception to this prohibition on things based on race. Not so after this case.

**Peter Sobota** [00:24:22] So that's, you know, and a lot of people who I've talked with since this, they just said, okay, what happened? But that's it right there. That's what happened.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:24:33] That's one of the things that happened.

**Peter Sobota** [00:24:35] And of course, this has nothing to do, I'm sure, with the fact that African Americans tend to vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. So that has nothing with this, of course.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:24:47] We're going to get to that too, because that's located in this case too.

**Peter Sobota** [00:24:51] Oh, okay.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:24:53] Okay, so that's one thing. So under the Callais decision, right, the court rewrote the criteria for finding a violation of the Voting Rights Act. And this goes to something that you said earlier, which is that now under Callais, you have to prove not just that a map of bridges the voting rights of racial or language minorities, but that it does so intentionally. And if you stop and think about that, it's really something because intentionality, right? Motive is virtually impossible to prove. It's something that goes on in people's minds. Right, why you're doing this. It's rarely explicitly stated. Usually what we see is what you said, the effects of it, the impact of it. That is no longer enough for a violation of the Voting Rights Act. Now, you have to show in the case of gerrymandering that the districts were drawn for the purpose of disenfranchising a racial minority. Okay. Yeah. And now I'm going to tie in what you said a minute ago. Okay. It's made even more difficult by the fact that while racial gerrymandering is prohibited, partisan gerrymandering is perfectly legal.

**Peter Sobota** [00:26:47] And by that, I mean, since 17 something, yeah, yeah.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:26:51] Which is, in the case of gerrymandering, drawing district lines to advantage a particular political party. That's okay. Racial gerrymandering isn't. And as you said, in this country, there's a huge overlap between race and political party affiliation. So, and I'll just give you an example, right? So in 2016 and 2020, in the two presidential races. In 2016, 89% of African Americans, in 2020, 87% of African Americans voted for the Democratic candidate. Right? It's huge. So under this case, Callais, to make a an electoral map violates the Voting Rights Act, you'd have to be able to disentangle race from partisanship and prove that it was race and not partisanship that was the motivating factor.

**Peter Sobota** [00:28:08] Mm-hmm. Well, easy peasy.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:28:12] So, you know, this is virtually impossible. So this is basically what legally the story is with Callais. I just want to mention two other trends that are kind of behind this. The first is that I mentioned that the Equal Protection Clause originally was designed to provide newly freed slaves, right, with their rightful place in American society, give them all the rights of their white counterparts. Okay. Over the past 45 years or so, the Supreme Court has reinterpreted the Equal Protection Clause to say that it's not about protecting against. Discrimination just against groups that have historically been disadvantaged, but discrimination is discrimination, and it's wrong no matter what. So discriminating against whites is treated legally, identically with discriminating, against people of color. That sort of reverse discrimination idea that we've seen. And you can see this in the Callais decision, where the court struck down a majority Black district as being race discrimination, right? That wouldn't have happened if we were still interpreting the Equal Protection Clause the way it was originally intended. So the other thread running through this is that we've been hearing for quite some time from the Supreme Court. There's been this drumbeat That we don't need these laws that protect

Historically disadvantaged populations because we're beyond racism things have gotten so much better That we can now dispense with all of that And you see that running through this case and others as well So who needs the Voting Rights Act, as you said, right? There's no more discrimination.

**Peter Sobota** [00:30:37] HUUUUHHH... I hesitate for a heavy pause there, but, um. I don't want to shift gears too much on you, but I guess I'm going to a little bit. We've been talking about the Voting Rights Act, 60 plus years in place. And then specifically section two, choose whichever one or both, at least in your opinion. I think I know the answer to this, but did it have an impact? Was the impact positive?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:31:20] Um, it, it had a huge impact, um, and, you know, almost immediately, which is really quite something. Um, you, know, just, um after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in, in 1965, by the end of 1965, 250,000 new black voters had been registered. I mean, it's really astounding just because of this new law put in place. And the number of elected Black public officials, the people we vote for, also who represent us, in 1970, there were about 1,500. Now, there are about 10,000.

**Peter Sobota** [00:32:18] That's an impact.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:32:20] At all levels of government. So, you know, it's undeniable that it has had an impact. And in another case, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and I'm gonna probably massacre her quote, but another important case that started this sort of trend to eviscerate the Voting Rights Act, because it was no longer necessary. She made an analogy to, Um, it's like. Throwing out your umbrella in the middle of a rainstorm because all this time it was protecting you from getting wet, you know? So if things have improved, it's because of laws like the Voting Rights Act. So, you now, jettisoning all of this is gonna have huge consequences. Yeah, so, and what's...

**Peter Sobota** [00:33:18] Yeah, this is what's great about having you is because you bring both perspectives into in terms of law and social work. So if we could pivot a little bit more to social work and get social work into the mix here. And, you know, from a social work perspective, in addition to being an attorney, you are, you know you're a scholar who has, who has framed, and I want to be clear here, you have framed civic participation as foundational to social work. And that this is something that we should be on all of the time. And you've authored a book titled Voting Is Social Work. So I think we kind of know where you stand, but let me drill down on both of those, if I could here. So the first one is, and I think people misunderstand this, why should political participation matter to social workers and how they position, for example, their practice and who they serve? Why do you think that's such a big deal?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:34:32] Um, well, for a number of reasons. Bye! Voting, which is part of political participation, right? In terms of our own participation, I'll start with that as social workers, it's probably the easiest way for us as social workers to have a say in how our government operates, which affects, as we know, everything from the regulations that govern our practice, Right? To the needs of our clients, their life chances, the problems that they face, as well as the resources that are available to us to help them, right? All of that is framed by government. And so political participation is the most kind of elemental way that we can influence that.

**Peter Sobota** [00:35:44] Yeah. And just being kind of inspired by what you just said, I'm also thinking that if you want to fight healthcare disparities, this is probably the playing field.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:35:57] Um, yeah.

**Peter Sobota** [00:36:00] Okay, so I didn't mean to interrupt, but you have me thinking here.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:36:04] Um in terms of the clients whom we serve, right? These are the same people by and large who are going to be affected by what's happening with the Voting Rights Act. We're talking about further marginalizing people who have already been marginalized. I think the reason I focus on voting is... That it's supposed to be the great equalizer in our society, right? No matter rich, poor, gay, straight, male, female, whatever, everybody gets the same one vote. And taking away that vote. Is like taking away a recognition of our personhood, of our value, right, of our basic humanity. Um, so it's really, you know, threatening voting rights, I see as, as, as really drastic in terms of its effect on individuals as well as, you know, the, the likely disenfranchisement of entire communities. So this kind of begs the question.

**Peter Sobota** [00:37:33] Question. And I'll just ask you, why are we in the streets? Why are we? Or why aren't we? Aren't. Aren't we are not to my, you know, to my own assessment, certainly not like the mid-60s.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:37:53] Well, I think if the we is the sort of broader we,

**Peter Sobota** [00:37:59] The broader we, the broader society.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:38:02] Uh, you know, I think we're seeing a lot of that pushback um A lot of people have been turning out for no king's day around the country People are standing on overpasses and street corners with signs, right? There are people who've been organizing against ICE's presence in their communities and doing amazing things neighbor to neighbor in terms of walking children to school if families are afraid to be out on the street, right, with a nice presence there. Making sure that people get groceries, you know, there's a lot, I think, that has been going on.

**Peter Sobota** [00:38:45] That's fair.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:38:46] And I think showing up at those things is really critical. I don't think in and of themselves they're gonna change anything, but I think keeping up that drum beat, that there's resistance being seen in opposition to things that are going on is really important.

**Peter Sobota** [00:39:08] Yeah And, you know, we'll get to that in a little bit when we try to get more practical. But just to keep on the theme that you were on in terms of why should this matter, and including to people like social workers who are in direct practice, who provide therapeutic counseling services, you know, I want to bring it back to social work. Peter, stop asking why people aren't in the streets. Let's talk about what's social work going to do. So the NASW Code of Ethics where, you know, our values are operationalized and put into action, those things place a strong emphasis on social justice and the dignity and worth of all persons, right? So. From your point of view, and you've alluded to this, but I wanna connect this directly to our ethics and values. How do voting

rights connect to those values? And how are they threatened by the decision? So two questions there. How are they connected?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:40:19] They're related. OK, so. We can't have social justice, right, when we are further marginalizing people who are already marginalized in our society, which is what this decision and these attacks on the Voting Rights Act do. That, you know, it's the populations who are all ready vulnerable who are taking the hit, and that's not social justice. And we can't allow that to happen. Um both on the the the big picture and because these are our client groups right um in terms of the dignity and worth of the person same thing if you are stripped of representation in your country you can't elect the represent people who represent you right Then your worth is not being recognized It's it's like another form of erasure. Um. In terms of other aspects of the code of ethics, other social work values. Voting and having a say in who represents you is also a form of self-determination. It gives you some measure of control over your destiny, another social work value. Take that away, right? And our self- determination takes a hit.

**Peter Sobota** [00:42:12] And empowerment, if you want to think about it that way as well, yeah.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:42:15] Yeah, and it's um, you know, there's a lot of research now on the the benefits of voting and In fact, there is evidence that it does increase self-esteem it increases Feelings of satisfaction it in it improves health and mental health Builds stronger communities. All of those things are true and discrimination on the other hand as you said takes its toll. It's exhausting, it's traumatic, it is disempowering. So our clients, right, all of this violates our code of ethics, and we should be in the streets because of the impact that it has on client wellbeing. And as you also said, on the practical side. Right? That if you're able to elect people who understand your background, your priorities, then the likelihood increases that they will respond to your community's needs, whether it's health and mental health care, whether it is affordable housing. Whether it's fair wages, whether it's support for minority-owned businesses, whatever it is your community needs, and we've just seen that undermined.

**Peter Sobota** [00:43:48] Yeah, so, you know, this reminds me of, you know, whenever they're, I'm thinking about after George Floyd was murdered and the folks in Minnesota. In their, I think, shock and anger started burning, you know, their downtown. And people were aghast. Like, why would they do this? Why would they burn this all down? And in their own community, when it's clear, you see, you don't have to look very far. It's actually pretty, I'm not advocating burning it down, but understanding why they burned it down because Because they don't own any of it. They don't have any power in any of them. And I think that's also a consequence of these kinds of moves, societal, that just, like you said, beat people who are already disadvantaged further down, and then we blame them for reacting, which perpetuates the whole game that's being played here.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:44:58] And I think we have to look at what's happening with the near elimination of the Voting Rights Act. I think it's that cataclysm.

**Peter Sobota** [00:45:08] Now, death by a thousand cuts, yep.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:45:10] I think we have to keep in mind that that's part of a much larger agenda in a couple of ways. You know, it's a one more piece in the sort of attack on DEI, which we've seen, right? Changing our history, book banning, erasure, various of our history. And it's also one piece in a much larger attack on free and fair elections. And there

are all kinds of other things going on to undermine our elections and the participation of vulnerable groups in our electoral system. And this is just one piece.

**Peter Sobota** [00:46:00] Yeah. And I think we should all understand that this is deliberate, intentional, patient, and so far, fairly successful. So before we get, before I get too cynical, as routine in our podcast, we try to discuss an issue at hand that we care about. And then as always, it's kind of time to ask, okay, so what can be done? What can, uh, what can we do? What can social workers do to respond? Do you, do you have any?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:46:44] So, you know, I think the thing to do really is to try to keep up with what's happening, because things are changing fast. And honestly, that's part of the strategy to that's part of The agenda, right? We're bidding being hit from all sides makes it hard to respond. We're all feeling very, I Think, stressed and overwhelmed. I think, in terms of voting rights, You know, we're having obstacles thrown in our way and we need to change who's in the leadership of this country in terms of we have congressional elections coming up in November that are gonna be absolutely critical because in fact, some of these changes can be overridden by the legislature, right? When the court interprets something, Congress can come back and clarify what it actually intends in a law. And so, you know, we need changes there. And I think we have obstacles and we just have to work that much harder to get out the vote to make sure that people of color are voting that other groups... Um, that are often sort of, um, face obstacles, getting to the polls, um. Turn out, uh, you know, we just have to redouble our efforts and, you know, if you look at, um it looks like this latest decision is going to significantly reduce the number of African-Americans in Congress. Yep. Um, a third of the congressional black caucus is likely to disappear, right? This is, you know. Hundreds of people at the state level, elected officials, it could be the biggest reduction in black representation that we've ever seen. And the response was from the African-American leadership on the Hill was, okay, so they're throwing these obstacles in our way, we're just gonna have to get past them. And I think that's the attitude that we have to take as well.

**Peter Sobota** [00:49:02] Mm-hmm. Yeah. And, and, and I would argue, I'd be interested in your take on this is that, you know, I have been working in a school of social work like you for a long time. And, I'm not being, I am not being judgmental here, but many, many students come in wanting, you know to focus on clinical work and providing interventions. And I get that. There is a time and a place for all of that. But this kind of micro or macro dichotomy, I don't think, helps us. I think it's both, right? I hope you were going to say right to that. It really should be both. And I'm really hoping that this is an invitation for us to get more invested and active in things like you were, I think, saying, grassroots organizations, voter mobilization. Going into communities and not saving them, but building coalitions inside of them. Because in trying to keep up with you reasonably for this podcast, I did some research on section two challenges. And what I found that was surprising, because we've been talking about Congress in this conversation, what I've found, and tell me if this is accurate, And I found that- but many of the challenges are at the local level, like school boards and state and local legislatures. Is that accurate?

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:50:39] Yes, and in fact, you know, this this recent case and the ones that preceded it are going to go all the way down the chain and affect all of that.

**Peter Sobota** [00:50:49] Exactly. Interesting.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:50:51] Um, I just wanted to add, you know, I totally totally agree with you than beating this drum for many years about the dichotomies between micro and

macro. Um, but I just want to emphasize that there are some really easy things that you can do if this, you know, sort of is outside your comfort zone. Thank you. Which is true of many people in our profession. And, you know, the last few years, I've become the postcard party queen in my neighborhood. And it's great. I invite my friends over. I get, you, know, postcards. They tell you what to write on them, who to address them to, and we bring food and drink and sit around and send off postcards... Making sure that people remember there's an election and know to vote, you know. There are a lot of things you can do, reminders on social media to your friends, your family, right, that there's a election coming up and making sure people have a plan for when and how they're gonna vote. You know, it doesn't have to be, doesn't, doesn't it have to, Something that takes up all of your time something that you know, you're afraid of right you can send texts There are people who organize that third. You don't have to talk to people face-to-face if that makes you uncomfortable I mean there are lots and lots of ways To help out and I encourage that

**Peter Sobota** [00:52:29] Yeah, absolutely. And you get a bunch of people doing that, it can have a big effect. So, you know. We have a few more minutes before we kind of have to cut ourselves off here, but I'm curious if you have given some thought as, you know, a long term and now, you know, emeritus educator, do you have any thoughts about how social work education might have to adapt to prepare students for this current moment and kind of what's ahead? You know, I'm thinking about, you know, I know our curriculum, excuse me, our curriculum best. I'm trying to think of how much we talk about civic engagement and participation. Of course, not all, don't get me wrong, not all, you know, people feel like they have to endure the policy class, rather than, you know, enjoy it, like crazy. And even democracy. I, you know, I'm not, we get it here and there, but I just wonder if we would be wise to focus more on those macro level and crucial environmental issues.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:53:58] So I would be a fan of more integration between the micro and macro. So it's not just about requiring more policy classes or I was privileged to be able to teach an elective on voting that had a lot of community activity involved. But those are segmented off and it's easy to kind of check the box if you're a student and say, okay, I took that class. I'm done with the macro stuff, right? I think the only way that it really makes sense is to integrate it so that if you're working with a particular population or interested in a particular pop you're seeing at the same time and learning about at the time what the environmental forces, including laws and policies are that are in play at the that you're talking about how to intervene clinically. Yeah, with that population so that you can really see clearly What person and environment means we Yes, which is us as a profession from other mental health professions, but Then we have curricula that kind of silo Micro and macro exactly. So I'd like to

**Peter Sobota** [00:55:20] Me too. And my hopeful space is that I have to say, to be fair, we have more and more students coming in recently, who are kind of like hell bent from the get go on macro practice. And so I really have seen a shift in that. I hope that that continues. So We are unfortunately, oh man, there's like three podcasts here. I have. I wanna give you, I guess, the last word, if you wanna take it. But if I could, I'm also wondering how somebody, such as yourself, who has been banging this drum for many years, how do you, where do you find the hope for change? And also whatever last word you wanna have. It's all yours.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:56:17] Um. I think it's very easy, as I said right now, for all of us to feel disillusioned and stressed over what's going on. And I was with a bunch of friends not long ago when we were all bemoaning the state of the world and particularly our

country right now. And being overwhelmed can lead a lot of us to paralysis, which I think is a big danger. I think we can take a breath, you know, my husband doesn't let me look at the news before bed, you know, that I don't sleep. But my friends made a really good suggestion, which is pick one thing, one thing you don't have to do at all. Pick one thing that you can do, one group to ally yourself with. And there are so many out there now that are doing good work. And that's it, it's all you have to do. But doing something helps alleviate that sense of powerlessness that I think many of us are suffering from. So, you know, we try to look at the good things that are going on, the pushback, the responses that we see in our communities and across the country. And I think it's important for our own peace of mind and mental health, rather than tuning it out to you know, we can have some boundaries for ourselves, but to get enough involved to work on one issue. And I think that helps a lot.

**Peter Sobota** [00:58:09] Yeah, and I also think if I could add that we're fortunate, at least in social work and in law, that we are very well positioned to do the work. I mean, it's kind of like our wheelhouse if we choose to accept it.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:58:26] I agree.

**Peter Sobota** [00:58:28] So Sunny, thank you so much for being willing to do this in a timely way. I know we kind of rushed you. We brought you out of a wonderful retirement to talk about this. We're really grateful. Thank you. It was an absolute pleasure to speak with you.

**Sunny Harris Rome** [00:58:48] Thank you so much.

**Peter Sobota** [00:58:50] Thanks again to Sunny Harris Rome for joining us and agreeing on really short notice to be my final guest in my role as host of the podcast. So this is it for me after 18 years with the UB School of Social Work podcast. It's been a gas. I wanna thank Deans Nancy Smith and Keith Alford for supporting the show and never, not once, telling us what kind of podcast to do or what not to do a podcast on. That's really amazing. Thanks to all of the folks I've worked with over the years, the former hosts, IT staff, and faculty. I've work alongside graduate assistants who have been instrumental in the production and delivery of this show. These are not so-called errand runners, but true collaborators in making the podcast what it is. Thanks to... Trevor Jones, Josh Bradley, Katie Clark, Rebecca Ruin, Yixin Vivian Wu, Michelle Bricker, Katelyn Beck, now Katelynn Rudin, Zeev Nawam, Michelle Melton, Kate Bares, Nic DeSmet, and Ryan Tropf. Say hi, Ryan: (**Ryan**: Hello!). A special thanks to my colleague and friend, Steve Sturman. We've been together from the start, and he's the glue who holds the whole thing together. Sincere thanks, Steve. We've done a lot of podcasts, and we've shared a lot laughs. The guests make the show. Thanks to every last person who freely gave their time and expertise. The best part of the job was meeting you, learning from you, and for some staying in touch long after the interview. And of course, the listeners. Without listeners, there's no podcast. Thanks for tuning in. Be sure to tune in for continued podcasts in our series with our new hosts, Doctors JoAnn Lee and Todd Sage. I know it's going to be good. Finally... And so it falls unto my lot, that I must rise and you should not. So I'll gently rise and softly call, good night and joy be with you all. Bye everybody.