

Vision for Democracy

Fortifying the Franchise in 2020 and Beyond

November 2019



Introduction

The right to vote is a fundamental right and, as the Supreme Court noted more than a century ago, it is **preservative of all rights**. Historically, the franchise was not open to all citizens in the United States. Only with years of struggle and a demand for inclusivity was the right to vote expanded to include women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinxs, Native Americans, and young voters. There was a recognition that our country could not legitimately claim to be a representative democracy when it banned huge segments of the population from participating. Without a democracy that affords fair and equal opportunities for participation to everyone, we cannot make meaningful progress on urgent civil and human rights issues like justice reform, immigration, affordable health care, education equity, and economic security. When our democracy is in peril, so too are our civil rights.

With each expansion, there have been corresponding efforts to erect barriers to restrict the franchise. Today our democracy and rule of law are under attack. Public officials have threatened our democratic norms, created barriers to the ballot box, and undercut the power and representation of people of color, Americans with limited English proficiency, young voters, and other groups historically excluded from our political process. This must end. The stakes for our civil and human rights are too high for inaction. Fundamental reforms are necessary to rebuild our democracy and ensure a government that works for everyone. The ability to participate in civic life – to have a voice in electing the public officials whose decisions impact our lives, families, and communities – is at the core of what it means to be a citizen.

This platform offers concrete policy proposals to address the many urgent issues that confront our nation in order to ensure that we have a strong, functioning democracy. We must demand that our public officials work together to restore integrity and legitimacy to our institutions. It is imperative that we build a 21st century democracy that represents our growing and diverse nation – a democracy that welcomes every person's voice and participation, no matter who they are and regardless of their race, color, language, or ability.

I voted.

Yo voté.

我投票了

لقد صوتت



Massive, systemic reforms at the federal, state, and local levels are necessary to remove obstacles to voting, guarantee that every vote is accurately counted, and create a more equitable system of representation. As a starting point, the transformation of our democracy must include passage of two vital legislative measures proposed in the 116th Congress: the Voting Rights Advancement Act and the For the People Act. Our platform offers policy reforms – many of which are contained within these two essential pieces of legislation – to eliminate discriminatory barriers to the ballot box and enhance the full spectrum of the electoral process so elections are free, fair, and accessible for all.

The policy reforms in our platform include proposals to:

1. Prevent Barriers to the Ballot Box
2. End Felony Disenfranchisement
3. Expand Voter Registration
4. Increase Voter Participation and Access
5. Strengthen Election Security
6. Create Structural Reform

1. Prevent Barriers to the Ballot Box

Discriminatory barriers to the franchise were enshrined in our nation's founding, when voting rights were granted exclusively to property-owning white males. Adopted after the Civil War, the 14th and 15th Amendments guaranteed citizens the right to vote free of discrimination based on race, but the promise of those constitutional amendments was never fully realized. Many states, especially in the South, passed discriminatory laws mandating literacy tests and poll taxes that made it next to impossible for African Americans and other voters of color to cast their ballots. It took more than a century for the franchise to meaningfully expand to women, people of color, and people with disabilities. The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally removed many first-generation barriers to voting experienced by voters of color, which led to significant and long overdue advances in minority participation and representation at the federal, state, and local levels.

However, discriminatory laws have been passed with increased frequency in the years since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision. The assault on voting rights has been **heightened in jurisdictions formerly covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act** such as Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina, since there is no longer a mechanism to block barriers to the ballot box before they are implemented and before elections are conducted. But voter suppression is not merely the province of those states with a long history of discrimination. Pernicious practices such as voter purging and restrictive identification requirements – which disproportionately impact voters of color – occur in states throughout the nation. In addition, states and municipalities continue to deploy distinct methods for disenfranchising Native Americans. Although progress has been made, some elected leaders in this country are still working to silence people who were historically denied access to the ballot box.

- Pass the Voting Rights Advancement Act or comparable legislation to prevent racial discrimination in voting and restore the protections of the Voting Rights Act that were eviscerated by the Supreme Court’s *Shelby County* ruling. Require that election changes be precleared by the U.S. Department of Justice or the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination or with a racially and linguistically diverse population.
- Pass the Native American Voting Rights Act or comparable legislation to remove ballot box barriers historically faced by Native American voters. Expand voter registration opportunities, mandate at least one polling place on tribal lands for each voting precinct, require tribal notice and consent for polling place changes, authorize the use of tribal identification cards, allow tribes to determine the form of language assistance, enhance access to federal election observers to prevent discrimination, and require government-to-government consultation.
- Prohibit the use of restrictive photo identification requirements. Mandate that if a state has a requirement that an individual present identification as a condition of receiving and casting a ballot, the state shall permit the individual to meet the requirement with a sworn written statement, signed by the individual under penalty of perjury, attesting to the individual’s identity and attesting that the individual is eligible to vote in the election.
- Allocate sufficient resources (including poll workers, ballots, and voting equipment) to all polling places so that no voter waits more than 30 minutes in line to cast a ballot, as proposed by the bipartisan **Presidential Commission on Election Administration**. This is not just an issue of good government but also of racial justice: **Polling places in African-American communities have far longer wait times than polling places in white neighborhoods**.
- Prohibit voter purging from voter rolls based on failure to vote and to respond to a mailed notice requiring confirmation of residence. **Jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination are conducting voter purges at particularly high rates**; millions of voters were purged from the voter rolls across the country between 2016 and 2018.



- Require that provisional ballots for eligible voters at incorrect polling places be counted. The casting of provisional ballots – which in many jurisdictions are not ultimately counted – **significantly correlates with minority and limited English-speaking voting communities.**
- Demand more aggressive enforcement of our federal voting rights laws by the U.S. Department of Justice and more effective oversight by Congress of enforcement deficiencies. **The current administration has not filed a single Voting Rights Act case.**
- Prohibit the chief state election administration official from taking an active part in a political campaign with respect to any election while continuing to exercise supervisory authority of the election. Public officials should not be permitted to place a thumb on the scale of their own elections or those of their political allies.
- Oppose the confirmation of federal judges with a track record that favors voter suppression and undermines voting rights. **The incumbent president has weaponized the federal judiciary to restrict voting rights in America.**

2. End Felony Disenfranchisement

Today, **state laws bar more than six million citizens convicted of felonies from casting a ballot.** In some states, **more than 20 percent** of the African-American population is not permitted to vote due to felony convictions, and across the nation **one out of 13** African-American adults cannot vote because of a felony conviction. Many state felony disenfranchisement laws were **passed after the Civil War to disempower African Americans** by linking the right to vote to a **criminal legal system deeply infected by racism.** Some states **condition the restoration of voting rights to the payment of unpaid fines or fees,** a type of modern-day poll tax. In addition, there are voting rights implications of naturalization bars for lawful permanent residents with criminal records, as well as implications for youth prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system.

Incarcerated individuals are also stripped of their voices in our democracy when it comes to drawing voting maps – they are counted as residents of their prison districts rather than of the districts they call home.

This practice, known as “**prison-based gerrymandering**,” distorts our democratic process by artificially inflating the population count and political influence of the districts where prisons and jails are located. As a result, the voting power of everyone living outside of those districts is weakened, which subverts the bedrock democratic principle of “one person, one vote.”

- Restore voting rights to all currently and formerly incarcerated citizens to ensure that no one ever loses the right to vote. Ensure currently incarcerated people – including people detained before trial – have access to absentee ballots or onsite polling stations so they have the opportunity to exercise their franchise.
- Provide individuals in prison with adequate and complete information regarding voting eligibility and registration while incarcerated and prior to release.
- End debt as a barrier to voting. **In eight states, this means repealing laws that explicitly link debt repayment and voting.** In many other states, this means assessing probation laws to see if debt repayment is required to complete a probation sentence. Condition federal grants on certification that states do not restrict voting based on unpaid debt.
- Prohibit prison-based gerrymandering by drawing voting maps using data that count incarcerated people at their home addresses, not where they are confined.

3. Expand Voter Registration

The fundamental right to vote provides American citizens with a voice in our democracy. Yet **roughly one in three eligible voters are not registered to vote**, and **voters of color, low-income voters, and young people are registered at even lower rates**, due to a long history and persistent practice of exclusion from our democracy. College students also face unique barriers in exercising their franchise.



Policymakers must make substantial reforms to modernize the voter registration system, increase the number of registered voters, and make it easier and more convenient for eligible voters to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Voter registration hurdles are a uniquely American phenomenon. **The United States is one of the few democracies around the world that places the onus of registering to vote on the individual rather than the government.** In most democracies, the government takes proactive steps to register every eligible voter, which is why the voter registration rates are so much higher in countries like **Great Britain (97 percent), Mexico (95 percent), Canada (93 percent), Germany (93 percent), and France (91 percent).** The United States must get in step with other advanced democracies when it comes to giving citizens a voice and opportunity to participate.

- ➔ Adopt automatic voter registration (AVR) so voters are automatically registered to vote whenever they interact with government agencies such as motor vehicle departments and public assistance agencies. In recent years, **18 states and the District of Columbia have adopted AVR**, and voter registration rates are significantly higher in such states. It has been estimated that **AVR could add up to 50 million voters to the rolls nationwide.** In addition, **adoption of AVR results in more accurate voting rolls and cost savings for states and counties.** AVR policies must provide safeguards so there is no penalty or punishment for ineligible voters who inadvertently either register to vote or cast a ballot.
- ➔ Establish same-day registration (SDR) so that any eligible voter may both register to vote and cast a ballot on Election Day, or on any day that voting is permitted, including early voting days. Currently, **21 states and the District of Columbia have enacted SDR**, and voter turnout is higher in such jurisdictions.
- ➔ Require the availability of online voter registration so that eligible voters may register and update their voter registration on safe, secure, and accessible websites. Currently, **37 states and the District of Columbia have some form of online voter registration.**
- ➔ Require portable voter registration election systems, to ensure that a person's voter registration remains valid when he or she moves within a state. **Portable registration helps narrow participation gaps among communities of color, young people, and low-income Americans**, whose residential transience contributes to low voter turnout.
- ➔ Prohibit voter intimidation including any acts that hinder, interfere with, or prevent someone from registering to vote or voting.
- ➔ Permit third-party voter registration drives – a critical component to ensuring eligible voters are registered – without restrictive limitations. Boards of elections should provide materials on voter registration to registration drives.



- Require states to designate all colleges and universities as voter registration agencies under the National Voter Registration Act, and require that voter registration opportunities and polling place information be provided to all students. All institutions of higher education must designate a campus vote coordinator to provide information for student voting inquiries.
- Permit pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds. Currently, **14 states and the District of Columbia permit pre-registration at age 16.**

4. Increase Voter Participation and Access

We must vastly expand not only voter registration but also voter participation. In a democracy, our votes are our voice. For our democracy to function properly and for government to provide fair representation, all eligible Americans must have the opportunity to vote and be encouraged to do so. Yet in **the 2016 presidential general election, only 60.1 percent of the voting-eligible population cast a ballot, and in the 2018 midterm general election, it was only 49.6 percent, a record high.**

There are many factors behind low voter participation levels in America, including low voter registration rates and barriers to the ballot box. In addition, low participation rates result from limitations on voting opportunities by, for example, shuttering polling places, limiting early voting, and restricting the ability to vote by absentee ballot. More opportunities will lead to more participation.

Voter participation will also increase with reforms that would make voting more accessible for voters with disabilities and voters whose first language is one other than English. These communities often face additional hurdles in exercising their fundamental right to vote, including polling sites and ballots that are not compliant with laws designed to protect these voters' freedom to cast a private and independent ballot.

- Permit voters to cast their ballot at an early voting polling location for a minimum of 15 consecutive days prior to Election Day. Require that early voting locations be open a minimum of 10 hours per day, and that they be accessible by public transportation, which is disproportionately relied upon by communities of color in light of continuing disparities in socioeconomic resources.

- Provide voters with the option of voting by absentee ballot by mail free of charge, without the need to provide an excuse as to why the voter cannot vote in person. **In 11 states, early voting is not available, and an excuse is required to request an absentee ballot.**
- Require a minimum of 30 days' public notice for polling place changes. **Polling place closures can be an invidious tactic for disenfranchising voters of color.** Decisions to shutter or reduce voting locations are often made quietly and at the last minute, making pre-election intervention or litigation virtually impossible. These changes can place an undue burden on voters of color, voters with disabilities, low-income voters, young voters, and voters whose first language is not English.
- Designate Election Day as a federal holiday for each general election occurring on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years, and encourage all employers to provide paid time off for their workers to vote. **The original rationale for designating Election Day on a Tuesday in early November no longer exists,** and for many Americans, taking time off to vote during the workweek presents a hardship.
- Ensure that all polling sites, ballots, and other voting materials are fully accessible to voters whose first language is not English pursuant to **applicable laws including Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act.**
- Require that all poll workers receive training on how to assist voters whose first language is one other than English. This should be a requirement regardless of whether the jurisdiction is subject to Section 203.
- Require that all poll workers also receive training on how to assist individuals with disabilities. Ensure that all polling sites, ballots, and other voting materials are fully accessible for voters with disabilities pursuant to **applicable laws including Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).**
- Make polling places, including the path of travel, entrances, exits, and voting areas of each polling facility accessible to individuals with disabilities, in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters. Closing polling places because of a lack of ADA compliance should happen only when there are no suitable alternative sites, and such sites should be arranged well before Election Day. Curbside voting and other best practices to ensure accessibility should be made available in addition to accessible polling sites.
- Make absentee voting and voting at home accessible to individuals with the full range of disabilities by providing accessible absentee voting systems that work in conjunction with assistive technologies that individuals regularly use where they live.



5. Strengthen Election Security

Elections are the cornerstone of our democracy, but we face unprecedented threats to our democratic process. The [Mueller report](#) revealed that the Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election “in sweeping and systemic fashion,” and the Senate Intelligence Committee issued a [recent bipartisan report](#) indicating that Russia attempted to exploit vulnerabilities in the election infrastructure in all 50 states during the 2016 election, and that no single group of Americans was targeted by Russian information operatives more than African Americans. Experts have indicated that [Russia and other countries are intent on interfering in future U.S. elections](#). There is an urgent need to strengthen the security of electoral systems and limit their vulnerability to foreign or domestic interference ahead of the 2020 election. Our nation faces severe cybersecurity threats, and we must take immediate action to safeguard and confirm the accuracy of our election results. Protecting the integrity of our democracy is a mission-critical task.

- Pass federal legislation and authorize sufficient appropriations for states to replace outdated and vulnerable voting equipment and require the availability of individual, durable, voter-marked and verified paper ballots, with suitable accommodations to allow voters with disabilities to mark and verify their ballots independently and privately. Provide the voter an opportunity to correct his or her ballot should a mistake be made, and require that ballots are preserved in a manner that makes it impossible to associate a voter to the ballot.
- Require statistically rigorous risk-limiting audits following all federal elections, to ensure and confirm the accuracy of the reported results.
- Fully fund and empower the independent, bipartisan Election Assistance Commission, which, among other services, [provides critical grants and guidance to states](#). Condition the receipt of federal grants on requiring state compliance with federal voting rights laws and federal election security standards for voting systems.
- Increase regulation and oversight of digital platforms to deter and guard against the spread of misinformation and suppression of the vote of communities of color.

6. Create Structural Reform

Meaningful democracy reform will require not only expanding the right to vote and safeguarding our elections, but also redistricting without gerrymandering; ensuring representational equality for residents of the nation's capital; and diminishing the corruptive role of money in our political system. Each of these reforms is necessary to remove discriminatory barriers that disadvantage and disempower communities of color in America, and to create greater political equality.

Redistricting is a game in which democracy rarely wins, and in which **partisan and racial gerrymandering have been deployed to deprive voters of color the power to elect officials who will represent their interests**. Partisan gerrymandering and racial gerrymandering have different legal and historical roots, but both have been used by incumbent politicians and political parties to entrench their political power at the expense of voters of color. Gerrymandering subverts democracy by allowing elected officials to choose their voters, rather than allowing voters to choose their representatives.

Denying full political representation to residents of our nation's capital is another fatal flaw of our democratic system. Residents of the District of Columbia – who are predominantly people of color – **pay more taxes per capita than any state in the nation** and defend our democracy through military service, yet lack U.S. Senators and a full voting member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The District of Columbia has more than 700,000 residents – a population larger than that of Vermont and Wyoming – but is denied full political representation in our legislative branch of government. It is time to end this second-class citizenship.

Finally, there is an urgent need to decrease the role of big money in our political system. The Supreme Court's dismantling of our campaign finance rules has tilted the playing field for the wealthy and powerful and has hollowed out the promise of equal justice under law.





Our campaign system has become dominated by a narrow set of wealthy, white donors who seek to advance policies that are often inimical to racial justice and the interests of communities of color. Our campaign finance system must be reformed in order for all Americans to enjoy equal access to the rights and freedoms of democracy.

- End political and racial gerrymandering by establishing diverse state commissions to conduct congressional and state legislative redistricting. The membership of such commissions must be representative of the demographic groups (including racial, ethnic, economic, and gender) and geographic regions of the state, and must provide racial, ethnic, and language minorities protected under the Voting Rights Act with a meaningful opportunity to participate in the development of the state's redistricting plan. **Only eight states have a commission with primary responsibility for drawing congressional district maps.**
- Admit the District of Columbia into the union as the 51st state, on equal footing with the other states in all respects, so that residents of our capital city finally have full political representation.
- Adopt the campaign finance and ethics reforms contained in the For the People Act. Build a 21st century campaign finance system to increase the power of small donors, reaffirm Congress's authority to regulate money in politics, and level the political playing field for communities of color and everyday Americans by creating a matching system for small donations and allowing people to exercise their due influence in a post-*Citizens United* world. Shine a light on dark money in politics by requiring all political organizations to disclose their donors, which will help break the current system that allows big-money contributors and special interests to hide their contributions to organizations that work to undermine the interests of communities of color and marginalized communities.

Signed By:

The Leadership Conference on Civil
and Human Rights
A. Philip Randolph Institute
Arab Community Center for Economic
and Social Services (ACCESS)
Advancement Project
American Federation of Labor and
Congress of Industrial Organizations
African American Ministers In Action
American Association of People with
Disabilities
American Federation of Teachers
American Humanist Association
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination
Committee
Americans for Democratic Action (ADA)
Americans for Indian Opportunity
Andrew Goodman Foundation
Arab American Institute
Arizona Coalition for Change
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
Asian & Pacific Islander American
Health Forum (APIAHF)
Asian American Legal Defense and
Education Fund (AALDEF)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice -
AAJC
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Blue Future
Brave New Films
Campaign for America’s Future
Campaign for Youth Justice
Campaign Legal Center
Catholic Network US
Center for Constitutional Rights

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center for Popular Democracy
Center for Science and Democracy -
Union of Concerned Scientists
Clean Elections Texas
Coalition on Human Needs
Colorado Civic Engagement Roundtable
Common Cause
Common Cause Minnesota
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of
the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
DC Vote
Demand Universal Healthcare
Demos
Disability Rights Florida
End Citizens United Action Fund
Entre Hermanos
Equal Justice Society
Equality California
Fair Elections Center
Faithful America
Fix Democracy First
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National
Legislation
Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda
Government Information Watch
Greenpeace USA
Health in Justice Action Lab, Northeastern
University School of Law
Hindu American Foundation
Hip Hop Caucus
Hispanic Federation
Hispanics in Philanthropy

Human Rights Campaign
Impact Fund
In Our Own Voice: National Black
Women's Reproductive Justice
Agenda
Indivisible
Innocence Project
Iota Phi Lambda Sorority, Inc.
Japanese American Citizens League
Lambda Legal
Latino Community Fund Georgia (LCF
Georgia)
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
Under Law
League of Conservation Voters
Education Fund
League of Women Voters of the United
States
Matthew Shepard Foundation
Media Mobilizing Project
Mexican American Legal Defense and
Educational Fund (MALDEF)
Million Hoodies Movement for Justice
Missouri Immigrant & Refugee
Advocates
MomsRising
Muslim Public Affairs Council
National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People
(NAACP)
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational
Fund, Inc.
NAACP - Tennessee
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters
of the Good Shepherd
National Association of Councils on
Developmental Disabilities
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of Social Workers
(NASW) California Chapter

National Association of Social Workers
Michigan Chapter
National Bar Association
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Congress of American Indians
National Council of Churches
National Council on Independent Living
(NCIL)
National Council of Jewish Women
National Education Association
National Fair Housing Alliance
National Immigration Law Center
National LGBTQ Task Force
National Organization for Women
National Partnership for Women &
Families
National Women's Law Center
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social
Justice
New American Leaders Action Fund
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
New York Immigration Coalition
North Carolina Asian Americans Together
(NCAAT)
North Carolina Council of Churches
OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates
Organize Florida
People For the American Way
PFLAG National
Pinellas County Urban League
Planned Parenthood Action Fund
PolicyLink
Pretrial Justice Institute
Progressive Turnout Project
Public Citizen
RepresentUs

Rise Up America
Service Employees International Union
Sierra Club
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)
Silver State Equality - Nevada
Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN)
SisterReach
SMART Elections
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund
Spread The Vote
Stand Up America
State Voices
Texas Civil Rights Project
Transformative Justice Coalition
UnidosUS

Union for Reform Judaism
United Church of Christ
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
Virginia Civic Engagement Table
Virginia Organizing
Voices for Progress
Voting Rights Forward
Voting Rights Institute
Voto Latino
We Vote United
WinlWin Network
Wisconsin Voices
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