



September 14, 2021

Dear Senator:

The Faithful Democracy interfaith coalition is writing to support passage of the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act as a first priority when the Senate returns from recess. The reforms in both bills are critical to returning power to everyday Americans and ensuring their freedom to vote. While our coalition partners represent a diversity of beliefs and traditions, we unite around the common goal of creating a healthier, thriving democracy. The undersigned faith-based organizations and congregations urge Senators to prioritize passage of these pro-voter, anti-corruption reforms and to do what it takes to pass them into law as soon as possible.

Our faith traditions teach that the right to vote in a democracy is a matter of dignity and that engaging in politics to create a more just world is our responsibility. Our advocacy work to address hunger, racial injustice, economic inequality, basic human needs, homelessness and climate change is predicated on a functional democracy where lawmakers are held accountable and constituents trust that they are taken into account.

While individual coalition partners may focus on specific titles or provisions in these bills, our coalition as a whole supports the passage of reforms included in the comprehensive For the People Act and the updated John Lewis VRAA. Together, these reforms would better align our democratic systems with values of inclusion, dignity, fairness, and civic engagement important to the faith community. **We urge lawmakers to keep them intact and to pass them quickly.**

We share our priorities for Senators returning from recess, ready to begin deliberation around these bills. As Senators consider the impacts of their choices for generations to come, we urge them to work with colleagues that have shown good faith efforts to debate the merits of these reforms. We ask that negotiating partners include Senators with a willingness to engage around provisions in S.1 and the John Lewis VRAA to make these bills stronger, rather than weakening them or stripping them of their broadly popular reforms.

Priority Reforms in the For the People Act:

Specifically, we applaud S.1 reforms of our elections, campaign and governing systems to better serve the interests of all, not just those with money. We support S.1 provisions to codify ethical norms that protect against self-interested corruption on the part of lawmakers and members of the judiciary. We urge S.1 reforms that empower low-income and middle-income people to vote, to engage in the political process and to run for public office. We applaud campaign finance reforms like those in S.1 that counter the influence of big donors and dark money in favor of small donor matching and disclosing financial sources. We embrace S.1 reforms that favor accountability and transparency of our government systems and our elected leaders. We support baseline standards for access to the ballot no matter what state or zip code a voter lives in. We staunchly support a

redistricting process that is free of partisan or racial gerrymandering, which is anathema to democratic principles and basic fairness.

These reforms in S.1 are priorities that respond to the democratic problems highlighted in the coalition's unifying Voters Covenant statement.

Expanding and Protecting the Freedom to Vote and Promoting Fair and Secure Elections

- Protect voting rights by either eliminating rules known to disproportionately disenfranchise Black and Brown voters or by mandating alternatives to accommodate the needs of low-income and communities of color.
- Require states to adopt best practices for increasing voter registration in federal elections, including online voter registration, automatic registration for eligible voters, and same day voter registration.
- Protect against improper purges of registration rolls—a practice known to disproportionately impact eligible voters of color.
- Restore the right to vote to people with prior criminal convictions, a harmful legacy of racial discrimination known to disenfranchise low-income and voters of color.
- Improve election administration with national standards for access to the ballot so that voters can count on 15 days of early in-person voting and voting by mail without burdensome requirements or restrictions.
- Establish standards and processes for drawing federal congressional districts like banning racial and partisan gerrymandering and requiring the use of independent redistricting commissions.

Reducing the Influence of Big Money in Politics

- Promote transparency by requiring shadow money organizations to disclose their donors and by strengthening funding and oversight of campaign finance and political spending.
- Empower small-dollar donors by creating a small donor matching system to finance campaigns, thus freeing officeholders to represent their constituents rather than wealthy megadonors.

Enhancing Ethics Standards for Government

- Strengthen enforcement of ethics rules for all three branches of government and broaden conflict of interest laws related to personal financial interests.
- Inhibit abuse of the “revolving door” between government officials and lobbyists.

Priorities in the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act:

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act fills a distinct and critical role in protecting the freedom to vote and ensuring elections are safe and accessible. We urge Senators to include the following provisions to restore the VRA.

- Update criteria under the “geographic trigger” for identifying states and localities required to obtain federal review of voting changes before they are implemented.
- Include the “practice-based” trigger in which every state and locality nationwide that is sufficiently diverse would be required to obtain federal review before enacting specific

types of voting changes that are known to be discriminatory in their use to silence the growing political power of voters of color.

- Require all states and localities to provide public notice to all voters of certain voting changes.
- Address the Brnovich decision by clarifying factors that voters of color can use to prove a vote dilution or vote denial claim under Section 2 of the VRA and restoring voters' full ability to challenge racial discrimination in voting in court.
- Allow the Department of Justice and voters of color to challenge changes in a voting rule that would make voters of color worse off in terms of their voting rights than the status quo.
- Expand authority for courts to "bail-in" jurisdictions to the preclearance process and would update the ability of jurisdictions to "bail-out" of the preclearance process once they demonstrate a record of not harming voters of color.
- Grant the Department of Justice authority to compel the production of documents relevant to investigations of potential voting rights violations prior to filing an enforcement action.
- Grant the U.S. Attorney General the authority to request federal observers anywhere there is a serious threat of racial discrimination in voting.
- Provide voters with additional protection by easing the standard for when courts can temporarily block certain types of voting changes while the change is under review in court. This is important because once a voter is discriminated against in an election, it cannot be undone.

Procedural Priorities in the Senate:

We recognize that the primary barrier to debate and passage of reforms to protect and strengthen our democracy is an arbitrary procedural rule. The function of the Senate filibuster rule in 2021 neither advances nor reflects the values of a healthy and thriving democracy. The rule currently enables a minority representation in the Senate to block debate on critical democracy reform legislation and, historically, it has been exploited to maintain white supremacy.

Faithful Democracy partners are focused on an outcome in which the freedom to vote is protected, dark money does not control our politics, districts are drawn fairly, and leaders are held to clear ethical standards. As a procedural tool with no basis in the Constitution, the filibuster is not serving to advance healthy debate nor the democratic process. It cannot take priority and be allowed to subvert democracy, thwart necessary reforms or deny justice in our nation. We encourage lawmakers to think creatively to find a legislative strategy to pass these reforms.

America has consistently expanded the franchise over centuries of violent prejudice and exclusion. Maintaining this trajectory towards a more perfect union must be a priority of the highest order for lawmakers. The eyes of history are upon our elected leaders to accept their responsibility and to do whatever is necessary to protect the freedom to vote and our democratic institutions.

Sincerely,

African American Ministers In Action
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Home Mission Societies
American Friends Service Committee
Arizona Faith Network
Bible Study for Progressives
Center for Common Ground
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes
Disciples Center for Public Witness
Faith in Public Life
Faithful America
Franciscan Action Network
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Maine Council of Churches
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC)
National Council of Jewish Women
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
North Carolina Council of Churches
Pax Christi USA
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Poligon Education Fund
Presbyterian Church (USA), Office of Public Witness
Reclaim Our Democracy
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team and Office of Anti-Racism and Racial Equity
Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia
Truth and Democracy Coalition
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice