



# **PATHWAY TO PROGRESS**

**HOW THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT  
WOULD PAVE THE WAY FOR PROGRESS  
ON THE PRIORITIES VOTERS CARE ABOUT**



**DECLARATION FOR  
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**



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# INTRODUCTION

Our democracy stands at a crossroads. We face a multitude of pressing challenges before an election that will likely hold the future of our nation in the balance. The very fabric of our democratic system is strained, and the right to vote, a fundamental tenet of democracy, is under siege, with the voices of marginalized communities being drowned out by special interests and deep-rooted systemic injustices.

Recognizing the dire need for reform to protect and bolster our democracy in the face of these challenges, the Declaration for American Democracy (DFAD) coalition is advocating for substantial changes to our democratic system. DFAD consists of over 260 member organizations representing the fights for racial justice, voting and civil rights, good government and anti-corruption, environmental justice, and much more. Through this series of issue briefs, we use our collective expertise to explain how the Freedom to Vote Act (H.R. 11 / S. 1), in particular, will bolster our democracy and help address the most critical issues impacting our nation.

The Freedom to Vote Act will safeguard civil rights and foster a more inclusive and just society. The bill includes provisions to:

- **Ensure every American can vote** by creating baseline national standards for voting access.
- **Respond to voter suppression** attempts that block access to the ballot.
- **Combat influence-seeking political money** that is flooding our elections and corrupting our government.
- **Provide critical safeguards to end extreme partisan gerrymandering** in redistricting.
- **Implement reforms needed to ensure election security** and measures to prevent subversion of the electoral process to maintain electoral integrity.

This report describes precisely how passing the Freedom to Vote Act would help address the following crucial and pressing issues:

- Racial justice and our criminal-legal system;
- LGBTQ+ rights,
- Environmental justice;
- abortion access;
- income inequality;
- Supreme Court ethics
- gun violence prevention; and,
- many of the other issues impacting our communities

Our communities face immense challenges in exercising their right to vote and to participate in our democracy. This must not be allowed to continue. Congress must move quickly to meet the systemic deterioration of the country's civil rights laws by passing comprehensive and progressive legislation to protect and strengthen the right to vote and ensure that everyone can exercise their fundamental right to have a say in their futures.

It is past time that Congress act on the **Freedom to Vote Act**, which would protect and strengthen the right to vote and participate in our democracy, and the **John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act** which would restore and modernize the comprehensive protections initially established by the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965.

However, despite overwhelming public support, the federal progress on these crucial issues has been stalled. Our elected leaders must prioritize taking action to strengthen our democracy. By proactively addressing these challenges through the Freedom to Vote Act and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act we can build a stronger, more equitable democracy, where every citizen's voice is heard. As the upcoming election year approaches, the choices we make now will have a profound impact on the future of our democracy.

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# RACIAL JUSTICE, VOTING, AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Deliberate attempts to create barriers to the ballot box date back to the founding of our nation, and the struggle to meaningfully expand the right to vote and ensure fair representation has been a hallmark of the civil rights movement.

Voters across the political spectrum want to enact voting rights reforms and ensure fair representation, but some elected officials are still working to silence people who have historically been denied their right to vote.

Two critical democracy reform bills that have been blocked despite majority support in both houses of Congress, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, would overcome barriers to voting that disproportionately impact people of color and people who are low-income, creating a fairer and more representative democracy for all Americans.

## What Americans Want:

- Prior to the 2022 midterms, a poll of the [71 most competitive House districts found that six in 10 voters cited protecting democracy as an extremely important reason that they decided to vote in November.](#)
- [A majority of voters](#) across party lines considered voting rights to be one of the most important issues in the 2022 elections.
- [Polling in August of 2023](#) found that 84 percent of voters support establishing national standards to protect the freedom to vote and two thirds of voters support automatic voter registration.
- 66 percent of voters, spanning across both political parties support the restoration of voting rights to people who complete felony sentences.

- Nearly [9 in 10 voters](#) oppose the use of redistricting in a manner that aims to help one political party or certain politicians win an election. This comprised 88 percent of respondents reported supporting former President Trump and 92 percent of President Biden voters.

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

In the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, five justices on the U.S. Supreme Court gutted key provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) that for decades protected voters in states with histories of pernicious voting discrimination. The impact was immediate and has continued, [giving state lawmakers](#) license to enact a wave of laws suppressing the vote of communities of color that previously would have been blocked by the VRA. These laws often deliberately and disproportionately target people of color and people who are low-income. The threat continues, as several courts have taken aim at the remaining provisions of the VRA, enabling vote suppression and gerrymandering that denies people of color the ability to elect representatives of their choosing. In 2019 and 2021, the House passed the Voting Rights Advancement Act (H.R.4) to restore the Voting Rights Act, but the Senate has twice blocked the bill even though it had majority support— Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to bring the bipartisan Senate bill to a vote in 2019, and the bill was blocked by the filibuster in 2021.

## How These Failures Harm Americans:

Since 2020, we've seen a drastic increase in the number of anti-voter bills introduced, passed, and implemented in states across the country. A report from the Brennan Center found that [between January 1 and October 10, 2023, at least 14 states enacted 17 restrictive laws, all of which will be in place for the 2024 general elections](#). These new laws put up barriers to voting, from limiting voting by mail to requiring strict voter ID, which has been proven to [disproportionately impact voters of color](#).

The practice of felony disenfranchisement, paired with the over-criminalization of communities of color in our justice system, leads to disparities in voter access: [one in every nineteen voting-age African Americans is disenfranchised.](#)

We've also seen suppression occur in the form of racial and partisan gerrymandering. The 2021 redistricting cycle was the first one without the full protections of the VRA. As a result, we've seen reduced representation of communities of color in a number of states, including Alabama, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Louisiana is [engaged in ongoing lawsuits](#) stemming from the state legislature's decision to draw just one black majority Congressional district despite having black voters making up 30% of the state's voting population. The Supreme Court is slated to hear a case from South Carolina, where a lower court ruled their districts were racially gerrymandered. However, while explicit racial gerrymandering is a violation of the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court previously ruled that partisan gerrymandering is not a violation - making the intent to discriminate against race very difficult to prove in court.

## **How the Reforms in the Freedom to Vote Act Would Help:**

Freedom to Vote Act: The Freedom to Vote Act (H.R.11/S.1) directly addresses many of the shortcomings voters see in our elections system by establishing automatic voter registration across the country, fully restoring rights to people who have completed felony sentences and enhancing access to the ballot through early and absentee voting. The bill also has provisions to increase election security and fight partisan gerrymandering, which would strengthen our democracy.

Importantly, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act is also necessary as it would fully restore the provisions in the Voting Rights Act to prevent voter



discrimination based on race, and would combat the anti-voter laws and racial gerrymandering we're seeing in communities across the country.

Taken together, the Freedom to Vote Act and John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would establish comprehensive national pro-voter election standards that strengthen American democracy, provide critical tools against race discrimination in voting, and shore up the freedom to vote for all Americans.

# THE CRIMINAL-LEGAL SYSTEM AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Democracy is strengthened when as many citizens as possible have the right to vote. But this foundational right is under unprecedented attack. Elected officials who want to create barriers to the ballot box and silence people who have been historically denied the right to vote have been aided by a criminal-legal system that replicates and reinforces patterns of racial and economic discrimination. 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. Today, state laws bar more than 4.6 million citizens convicted of felony offenses from casting a ballot. Across the nation, [one out of 19 African-American adults cannot vote](#) because of a felony conviction, which is 3.5 times the disenfranchisement of non-African Americans.

## What The People Want:

Eight in 10 likely voters [support](#) criminal justice reform, including 74 percent of Republicans, 80 percent of independents, and 85 percent of Democrats. Two-thirds of voters (66 percent) believe the criminal justice system needs a complete overhaul or major reform. A majority (56 percent) of voters [support](#) the full restoration of voting rights to all citizens over the age of 18, including those completing a sentence, both inside and outside of prison.

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

The current American criminal-legal system is a stain on our constitutional promise of neutral justice and representative democracy. The criminal-legal system replicates and reinforces patterns of racial and economic discrimination that can be traced back to slavery, legal segregation, continuing forms of

exclusion that result in explicit and implicit bias, and practices and policies that continue unnecessary and disproportionate contact with the criminal-legal system. The result is a bureaucracy that denies millions of people the opportunities, legal equality, and human rights they deserve while at the same time fueling the world's highest incarceration rate.

Racial discrimination and disparities persist at every stage of the criminal-legal system. Pretextual stops and traffic enforcement are typical entry points into the system for people of color, and law enforcement officers have substantial discretion when determining whether a person's behavior is suspicious enough to warrant further investigation. Disparities in policing practices lead to disparities in incarceration rates. For example, Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly 5 times the rate of white Americans — nationally, one in 81 Black adults is serving time in [state prison](#). Latino and Indigenous communities are also disproportionately represented in the criminal-legal system. Because of their interaction with the criminal-legal system, millions of people, disproportionately people from Black and Brown communities, lose their voting rights both while they are incarcerated and after they return to their communities.

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

Criminal-legal matters unrelated to citizenship and civic duty can have a long-lasting impact on a voter's ability to participate in the democratic process. One out of 50 adult citizens — 2 percent of the total U.S. voting eligible population — is [disenfranchised](#) due to a current or previous felony conviction. In some cases, formerly incarcerated individuals are expected to pay taxes and contribute to society without being allowed to make their voices heard at the ballot box. Incarcerated people 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 district population count and political influence of districts with prisons.

## **How the Reforms in the Freedom to Vote Act Would Help:**

Congress [must pass](#) the Freedom to Vote Act (S. 1/H.R. 11) and the Democracy Restoration Act (S. 1677/H.R. 4987), or similar federal voting rights legislation that includes rights restoration for formerly incarcerated people, in order to fix our democracy and help communities most vulnerable to disenfranchisement.

The Democracy Restoration Act, which is included as a provision of the Freedom to Vote Act, restores voting rights to all formerly incarcerated Americans. Not only will this legislation restore voting rights, but it will also inform recently-released citizens of their voting rights — cutting down on confusion around their voter eligibility. Each state will be required to notify in writing any individual who has been convicted of a criminal offense under the law of that state that they have the right to vote, post-incarceration, in an election for federal office and may register to vote in any such election. States will also be required to provide any materials that are necessary to register to vote in those elections.

The Freedom to Vote Act also directly overcomes many of the barriers voters see in our elections system by establishing automatic voter registration across the country and enhancing access to the ballot through early and absentee voting. The bill also includes provisions to increase election security and fight partisan gerrymandering, which would strengthen our democracy.

Without meaningful federal voting rights reform, millions of Americans who have had interaction with the criminal-legal system will remain disenfranchised.

# LGBTQ+ RIGHTS AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

With states across the country [passing](#) laws discriminating against LGBTQ+ people, and the Supreme Court [allowing](#) businesses to openly discriminate against LGBTQ+ customers, life is becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous for the LGBTQ+ community-- especially for LGBTQ+ people with intersecting identities—including Black people, people of color, people with disabilities, and those with limited means. The right to be counted, to have a voice, and to have a seat at the governing table, is fundamental to effectively fighting back against anti-LGBTQ+ bias, discrimination, and erasure.

## What The People Want:

Recent polling shows [broad support](#) (80 percent) for laws forbidding LGBTQ+ discrimination with regard to employment, housing, and public accommodations. People also [broadly oppose](#) (62 percent) so-called “don’t say gay” legislation, which restricts what can be taught about sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in classrooms. The Equality Act, which [passed](#) the House of Representatives in the 117th Congress and would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, also received broad support from Americans (70 percent).

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

Our democracy is failing the LGBTQ+ community. Voter suppression tactics such as strict ID requirements are especially problematic for transgender and non-binary Americans. These laws create financial and legal barriers for many in the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, many states don’t permit transgender people to get an identification card that matches their correct gender unless they

can prove they have had costly gender-related surgery, which may be undesired or out of reach. Similarly, voting restrictions on returning citizens also place an undue burden on LGBTQ+ Americans: of the [4.6 million people](#) barred from voting due to a previous felony conviction, [LGBTQ+ people](#), and especially [LGBTQ+ women of color](#), are overrepresented.

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

An unrepresentative, failing democracy and LGBTQ+ discrimination go hand in hand. It is no surprise that the Human Rights Campaign reports [more anti-LGBTQ+ bills](#) were introduced in state houses in 2023 than in each of the prior five years. A [2019 analysis](#) showed that LGBTQ+ adults are more likely to live in poverty than their straight and cisgender counterparts, and poverty rates are higher among LGBTQ+ people of color. This is in part a result of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in the workplace and when looking for [housing](#). Yet civil rights legislation that would improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people has been blocked in Congress and in some states, including laws like the Equality Act, which passed the House but not the Senate in the last Congress.

## **How the Reforms in the Freedom To Vote Act Would Help:**

The LGBTQ+ community needs increased representation in government. Without federal protections, they will be disproportionately impacted by state voting restrictions and barriers to the ballot box. By combating partisan gerrymandering and improving access to the ballot box, the Freedom To Vote Act would make elected officials more responsive to the needs of their constituents, which could lead to the passage of popular bills like the Equality Act. It would also protect transgender and non-binary voters from discriminatory efforts, making access to the ballot attainable.

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Communities of color and low income communities are disproportionately and unfairly harmed by the effects of pollutants and climate change. Communities grappling with environmental justice challenges need accountability, transparency, and responsiveness from their elected officials so they have an equal voice in deciding their future--and their health. That starts with voting rights, with access to the polls, and with a system that does not dilute their voice.

## What The People Want:

Americans want solutions to the climate crisis. They want to live in a healthy environment. A recent poll by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication showed that two-thirds of Americans are worried about the [climate crisis](#) and 66 percent of registered voters support Presidential and Congressional action to develop [clean energy solutions](#). People are tired of the lack of accountability in our political system and are disillusioned with a system rigged in favor of big polluters and their allies. Families want clean drinking water, healthy air, and safe and nurturing communities.

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

Fossil fuel companies have an outsized influence in our democracy, spending [millions of dollars](#) on lobbying and political ads to influence elected officials to approve hazardous projects at the expense of the people, creating so-called "[sacrifice zones](#)." These sacrifice zones regularly overlap with historically marginalized communities that have been and continue to be targets for voting

rights [suppression](#). Thus, the people most affected by these environmental decisions have the least say in how they are made. These hazardous projects are forced onto tribal nations without their informed consent, and in the process they reinforce the legacy of genocide and colonialism. Fossil fuel companies also influence elected officials to continuously approve new fossil fuel projects while blocking green energy alternatives, exacerbating the climate crisis, and disproportionately harming historically oppressed frontline communities.

Furthermore, fossil fuel companies don't stop with approval of their projects, but push anti-protest laws to prevent frontline communities from exercising their First Amendment rights to oppose policies and projects that [negatively impact](#) their communities. These laws come in many forms, including bills that label environmental activists as domestic terrorists and so-called "critical infrastructure" laws that boost penalties for trespassing near pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure. In their efforts to squash dissent, fossil fuel companies work with local, state, and federal law enforcement to [surveil and investigate](#) protesters exercising their right to protest fossil fuel infrastructure projects. This surveillance and vast data collection further chills First Amendment activities.

As if that weren't enough, fossil fuel companies silence dissent and freedom of speech through frivolous lawsuits, known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation or SLAPP suits, aimed at bankrupting activists and press for speaking out against injustices committed by these same companies. Big Oil will stop at nothing to boost their profits, even if it means attacking our freedoms, undermining our democracy, exacerbating the climate crisis, and sacrificing the health of directly impacted communities.

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

The systematic erosion of our democracy prevents us all from fighting for the future that we need. It allows the climate crisis to worsen and wreaks havoc on our communities with increased occurrences of natural disasters, stronger and more unpredictable hurricanes, bigger wildfires, and longer droughts. It allows



polluters to escape accountability for poisoning our drinking water, dirtying our air, and toxifying the very ground on which we live. Kids growing up in pollution hotspots are at heightened risk of cancer, respiratory issues, and long-term mental and physical health issues all so fossil fuel executives and shareholders can get richer at other communities' expense. These harms fall disproportionately on communities of color. Currently, [70 percent of African Americans](#) live within two to four miles of a toxic release facility. Latino communities are affected by wildfires [twice as much](#) as other groups in the U.S. If we do nothing, our backsliding democracy will continue to perpetuate the harms of environmental inequity and injustice.

## **How the Reforms in the Freedom To Vote Act Would Help:**

The Freedom to Vote Act would protect equal voting power for directly impacted communities, allow constituents to hold their elected officials accountable for valuing profit over people, and create the necessary conditions for the green and vibrant future that our communities crave and need. By expanding access to the ballot for all voters –including those in sacrifice zones – reforming the redistricting process to create more equitable maps, and directly addressing big and secret money in politics, we can create a democracy that is representative of and responsive to the people. The fight for environmental justice is dependent on the fight for voting rights and our democracy.

# ABORTION ACCESS AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

In June 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the federal constitutional right to abortion, triggering a devastating spate of abortion bans and restrictions across the country. Access to the ballot and access to essential reproductive healthcare, including abortion, are intertwined. When voting rights are restricted, abortion access and reproductive rights and justice are simultaneously undermined. Discriminatory voter suppression laws fuel an environment in which restrictions on healthcare can pass. The Freedom To Vote Act would restore critical protections to the right to vote and fair representation, bringing us closer to restoring access to essential reproductive healthcare.

## What The People Want:

A [Gallup poll](#) conducted a year after the fall of *Roe* found that 85 percent of Americans believe abortion should be legal at least in certain circumstances, and 69 percent believe it should broadly be legal in the first three months of pregnancy. This support has remained steady throughout the last year, and is consistent across gender, political party, and geography. According to a June 2023 [CBS News/YouGov poll](#), 57 percent of Americans believe that overturning *Roe* was bad for the country. Other polls and [ballot initiatives](#) since access to abortion was struck down [indicate](#) that abortion is an important driver of voters to the polls.

Specifically, in the time since *Roe V. Wade* was overturned, voters made clear at the ballot box that they support preserving access to abortion. From 2022 through 2023, ballot measures to protect abortion access were passed in

[California, Michigan, Vermont, and Ohio](#), while voters in Kansas, Montana, and Kentucky rejected ballot measures to restrict abortion access.

Reproductive Justice leaders and organizations have been at the [forefront](#) of the intersection between abortion access and democracy. Reproductive Justice, a movement created by women of color, recognizes the importance of linking reproductive health and rights to other social justice issues such as voter suppression and state violence. It is a framework that requires us to center those who are most affected in the fight for bodily autonomy, while working towards a future in which all people have the power to make informed decisions about their bodies, their families, and their futures.

## **How Our Democracy Is Failing:**

Communities most harmed by barriers to the ballot box overlap with those most harmed by barriers to reproductive health care, including Black people, people of color, LGBTQIA+ folks, those with limited means, people with disabilities, and young people. Reproductive justice leaders and organizations have been at the [forefront](#) of the intersection between abortion access and democracy. [Partisan gerrymandering](#), maps drawn in favor of one political party, allows some politicians to stay in power even when they no longer represent the views of the majority of their voters. Voter suppression laws, like those limiting early voting or strict voter ID laws [disproportionately impact](#) Black people and other people of color. The intensifying [criminalization](#) of abortion care also means people may face criminal charges and could therefore lose their right to vote for obtaining, performing, or assisting with an abortion.

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

Access to the ballot is key to ameliorating these harms. [More than 16 million people](#) who may need an abortion have no access to one in their state. One [recent report](#) documenting instances in which the health care of a pregnant

person was negatively impacted by abortion bans, found instances of pregnant people being turned away from hospitals while facing life threatening pregnancy conditions. Another [study](#) found that women in states with abortion bans are nearly three times more likely to die during pregnancy, childbirth, or soon after giving birth. This is particularly true for Black women who, even prior to *Roe* being struck down, were already three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women. Abortion bans and restrictions, driven in part by anti-democratic laws, are causing catastrophic harm to communities across the country.

## **How the Reforms in the Freedom To Vote Act Would Help:**

Voter suppression heavily impacts reproductive rights and justice. The reforms in the Freedom to Vote Act would help strengthen every eligible voter's voice and create a democracy that helps voters pick their leaders, not the other way around, by outlawing partisan gerrymandering of Congressional districts. Candidates across the country are running on platforms that are pushing for national abortion bans, or severely weakening access to abortion and reproductive healthcare, more generally. There are many key races and ballot initiatives where bodily autonomy could be expanded or limited, and voter suppression laws will silence the voices of the people, including impacted communities. The Freedom to Voter Act will promote voter access and election integrity making voting accessible to all.

# INCOME INEQUALITY AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

## What The People Want:

At the [beginning of 2023](#), the richest 10 percent of Americans owned 69 percent of the country's total wealth, while the bottom 50 percent owned only 2.4 percent. This level of income inequality, last seen during the 1920's prior to the Great Depression, threatens the very foundations of our democratic system. As the wealth gap widens, the voices of ordinary Americans are increasingly drowned out by the special interests, corporations, and wealthy elites who wield outsized influence on the political system. This is even more true for members of historically marginalized communities that have borne the brunt of systemic oppression and regressive economic policies.

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

Income inequality distorts political influence and exacerbates policy prioritization. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few allows the affluent to wield disproportionate political influence. Through campaign contributions, lobbying, the revolving door, and undisclosed political spending, special interests and a wealthy few can shape policy outcomes that favor their economic interests while neglecting the needs of the broader population. This influence corrodes the essence of democracy, where each citizen's voice should carry equal weight.

Some elected officials, under the influence of wealthy donors, regularly prioritize policies that further exacerbate income inequality. Tax cuts for the rich, deregulation, and reduced social safety nets disproportionately benefit the affluent at the expense of the working class, perpetuating economic disparities.

This dynamic has eroded trust in our government. When people perceive that the system caters to the wealthy, they may disengage from the political process, weakening the democratic fabric of our nation. As a recent report from the Brookings Institute found, [“an increasingly unequal society can weaken trust in public institutions and undermine democratic governance.”](#)

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

Income inequality has been accompanied by an [increase in the residential concentration of poverty](#) and affluence, which can exacerbate a number of other issues facing communities. Studies have shown that individuals with lower incomes have [decreased social mobility](#) and often have fewer educational and occasional opportunities.

Income inequality is also closely tied to racial inequality. Stemming back from slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining, black communities in America have faced systemic injustices that have resulted in massive income inequalities between Black and white households, regardless of households' education, marital status, age, or income. For instance, a study in 2018 found that the [median wealth for black households](#) with a college degree equaled about 70 percent of the median wealth for white households without a college degree.

These stark income disparities erode the very essence of democracy and allow the privileged few to have an outsized voice in our political system. A thriving democracy, however, empowers citizens to advocate for policies that promote economic fairness and social justice. Conversely,

## **How The Reforms In the Freedom To Vote Act Help:**

The Freedom to Vote Act includes provisions to combat the influence of secret money in politics by increasing transparency and disclosure in campaign

spending. This would help level the playing field by reducing the outsized impact of wealthy individuals and corporations, while creating a space for meaningful participation by all Americans.

The Freedom To Vote Act would also eliminate barriers to voting, which disproportionately impact the poor, as most working Americans struggle to, for instance, take hours out of their days (and potentially sacrifice hundreds of critical dollars) to stand in line to vote. Its reforms would also help ensure fair representation of people of all income levels and classes, and help create a government that reflects the real struggles of working Americans. The Freedom to Vote Act will also help ensure every person, regardless of income, has the opportunity to participate in the democratic process is critical in ensuring the voices of all individuals can be heard. The Freedom to Vote Act provides state innovation funds; public funds available to states to fund a voluntary small-donor driven matching funds system for U.S. House candidates. These program would amplify the voices of working class people, and incentivize candidates to spend time with their constituents rather than big donors and special interests.

To combat income inequality effectively, we must strengthen our democracy and ensure that the voices of all Americans are heard in the corridors of power. The Freedom To Vote Act stands as a critical step in this journey, aiming to rectify the imbalances that threaten our democratic ideals.

# GUN SAFETY AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Gun violence is tearing our nation apart. Guns are now the [leading cause of death](#) among U.S. children and teenagers, surpassing car accidents and cancer. Nearly 49,000 people were [killed by guns](#) in the U.S. in 2021—a 23 percent increase since 2019. A record number of Americans want their leaders to act, but gun manufacturers, the gun lobby, the Supreme Court, and an unrepresentative Congress are blocking any attempt to address the crisis.

## What The People Want:

[Nearly 75 percent](#) of Americans believe that gun violence is a crisis. More than [three in five](#) say gun laws should be stronger, with [bipartisan majorities](#) supporting many gun violence prevention reforms. [Eighty-eight percent support background checks](#) on all gun sales and 67 percent support a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. Over half of Republicans from gun-owning households believe that lawmakers have not done enough to stop gun violence.

## How Our Democracy Is Failing:

The gun lobby in America devotes millions of dollars each year to lobby federal and state lawmakers, to appoint gun-friendly judges to the bench, and to oppose common sense policies to reduce gun violence. Gun rights groups [consistently and significantly outspend gun control groups](#)—spending nearly 5 times as much on federal lobbying in 2021 and 2022. The [National Shooting Sports Foundation](#), a gun lobby group representing the gun industry, spent nearly \$5 million on federal lobbying in 2022. The NRA spent \$2.6 million. Gun Owners of America spent [\\$3.3 million](#), lobbying on 162 federal bills in 2022, more than any other gun rights group.



## How These Failures Harm Individuals:

America has [more guns and the weakest gun laws](#) of any comparable nation. Americans are 25 times more likely to be killed in a gun homicide than people in other high-income countries, and while the U.S. accounts for only 4 percent of the world's population, it accounts for 35 percent of global firearm suicides. Furthermore, gun violence [disproportionately hurts](#) Black and brown Americans, exacerbating existing inequities. Black Americans are [10 times more likely to die by gun homicide](#) than white Americans.

For decades, Congress has failed to pass meaningful gun violence prevention legislation. Although a [limited bipartisan gun safety package](#) passed in 2022, the bill did not expand background checks or restrict assault weapons. At the same time, the Supreme Court [struck down New York's restriction on concealed firearms](#), opening the floodgates to legal challenges to gun violence prevention laws across the country. As a result, there has been a recent alarming [acceleration of mass shootings](#), frequent occurrences of [gunfire on school grounds](#) and [increasing incidents of armed robberies, carjackings](#).

## How the Reforms in the Freedom To Vote Act Would Help:

The *Freedom To Vote Act* ([H.R. 11](#)) is historic pro-voter legislation to strengthen our democracy, and curb the influence of big money in politics. By banning partisan gerrymandering that limits the political power of communities of color and urban areas, and limiting the financial dominance of lobbyists and special interests, the bill ensures that the vast majority of Americans, who are demanding action on gun violence, will have their voices heard in Washington.

# SUPREME COURT ETHICS AND THE FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Over the past two years, the high court has experienced a series of ethical scandals that have tarnished public faith in the judiciary. In fact, Americans' trust and confidence in the judicial branch is at the [lowest level](#) since Gallup began polling the question in 1972. That number has dropped twenty points in the last two years, as the public learned that Justice Thomas [failed to recuse](#) himself from cases involving his spouse's political and financial interests and [concealed](#) hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts and travel from billionaire political benefactors, Justice Alito failed to recuse from 10 cases related to wealthy benefactors who treated him to [luxury vacations](#), and a draft opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturning *Roe v. Wade* leaked. Americans' confidence in the Supreme Court is [also](#) at the lowest level since Gallup began polling the question nearly 50 years ago.

## What The People Want:

Americans overwhelmingly favor holding the Supreme Court to a formal code of conduct: [90 percent of Americans](#) support a binding code of conduct for the high court. This staggering level of support crosses political and ideological lines, with 96 percent of Democrats, 84 percent of Republicans, and 83 percent of Independents supporting the policy, as well as 98 percent of liberals, 90 percent of moderates, and 83 percent of conservatives.

## How Our Democracy is Failing:

The U.S. Supreme Court is the only federal court in the nation not bound by an explicit, written, and [enforceable](#) code of conduct. While the Supreme Court adopted a code of conduct in November of 2023, the code lacks any enforcement

mechanism and unfortunately falls short. As it's currently set up, the justices themselves will decide when they have violated these rules and there is no disciplinary mechanism.

Unlike Supreme Court justices, every judge in every jurisdiction in the United States – city, county, state, tribal, territorial, and federal – is subject to a binding code of ethics that embodies basic judicial ethical precepts with viable enforcement mechanisms. For decades, liberal and conservative judges and justices have routinely and publicly tested the limits of the judiciary's absurdly weak rules, while activists and advocates across the ideological spectrum have found troubling ways to exploit every gap they can find. This reality, created and spurred on by years of bipartisan benign neglect and absence of accountability, led to the scandals of the last two years and the disintegration of public faith in the high court.

## **How These Failures Harm Individuals:**

A conflicted judiciary and an unethical Supreme Court violates litigants' constitutional right to due process of law, which is the fundamental right to have your disputes heard by an impartial tribunal that evenhandedly applies and enforces the laws of the land. Judicial misconduct and the Court's unwillingness to subject itself to even the most modest ethical standards, force Americans to question whether the highest court in the land can truly render impartial and equal justice.

In addition to its lawmaking authority, the Supreme Court exercises supervisory power over all federal courts and this core responsibility shapes the public's perceptions of their legitimacy. The absence of a binding code of ethics for the justices of the Court compromises our judicial system. The principle that everyone is entitled to fair treatment from an impartial arbiter is one of the foundations of our democracy.

## **Reforms in the Freedom to Vote Act Would Help:**

Congress must pass the Freedom to Vote Act to increase transparency about the people trying to buy influence on the Court by requiring groups that spend money on ads supporting or opposing judicial nominees to disclose their donors. By building a truly representative and democratic government, the Freedom to Vote Act would strengthen our democracy, restore trust in our institutions, and protect the longevity of our democracy and democratic systems.

Additionally, Congress must pass federal legislation to ensure the Supreme Court abides by a binding code of ethics. While the Court's recent Code of Conduct is a step towards improving its ethical foundation, it is unenforceable and contains loopholes and ambiguous phrases that may well allow the justices to behave in much the same way they have been behaving for the last thirty years. The Court's recent decisions have enshrined ideology into law, overturning decades of precedent on issues of fundamental rights impacting the most vulnerable members of our communities, including voting rights, abortion rights, affirmative action, and gun safety. The highest court in the land should be held to the highest ethical standards. In addition to preventing corruption and conflicts of interest, a code of ethics would also help restore trust to our democratic systems.

Paired together, the *Freedom to Vote Act* and a binding and enforceable Supreme Court code of ethics would ensure that our democratic institutions work on behalf of the people, free of the influence of outside individuals or entities and free of personal conflicts of interest.

# CONCLUSION

The people, and in particular communities that have been the victims of systemic oppression, currently face overwhelming challenges in exercising their rights to participate in our democracy. These barriers are damaging our democracy, undermining faith in our government, and blocking progress on the issues impacting communities. Congress must step in and enact systemic federal legislation to repair our democracy's broken fabric.

The Freedom to Vote Act is a pivotal step, broadening ballot access, limiting the sway of money in politics, and fostering fairness and integrity within our judicial system. Additionally, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2023 would restore the extensive safeguards established by the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Together, these bills would ensure equitable access to the ballot, safeguard against discrimination, and reinforce the democratic principles fundamental to addressing the most pressing issues of our era. It is clear that without meaningful federal voting rights reform, the marginalized and disenfranchised will continue to bear the brunt of these injustices.