American democracy is, as Abraham Lincoln said, is a government “of the people, by the people, [and] for the people.” Perhaps the most fundamental right in our democracy is the right to vote. Yet for far too long, suppressing the right to vote has been used as a tool to marginalize racial and ethnic minorities.

In response to the ratification of the Reconstruction Era Amendments, which among other things, ended slavery and granted African Americans the right to vote, Jim Crow laws were passed far and wide to segregate races and prevent African Americans from voting. It wasn’t until the Civil Rights Movement and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that many of these roadblocks were removed.

For decades, the Voting Rights Act prevented discriminatory laws from being enacted. Yet, in 2013 the Supreme Court struck down the heart of the Voting Rights Act, a formula that required certain localities with a history of discrimination against minority voters to seek pre-approval from the federal government before any changes to their voting laws went into effect. Since this decision was handed down, communities have been without the full protections of the Voting Right Act, and states have passed restrictive voting laws, even targeting minority voters with “surgical precision.”

Tackling the wave of voter suppression efforts requires local, state, and federal responses. Indeed, our government should be making it easier to vote, not more difficult. Below are key priorities for strengthening democracy by expanding access to the ballot and protecting voting rights.

**Restore the Full Protections of the Voting Rights Act.** The Voting Rights Act is known as the most effective civil rights laws in American history. Without its full protections, minority voters are being disenfranchised at alarming rates. The Senate must pass the Voting Rights Advancement Act, which revises the criteria for determining which localities are subject to the pre-clearance requirement in the Voting Rights Act. This legislation, H.R. 4, passed the House of Representatives in December 2019.

**Eliminate Restrictive Voter Identification Laws.** Proponents of voter identification
laws argued that requiring a voter to provide an ID would reduce voter fraud. Yet the type of fraud these laws would prevent is incredibly rare. Research from the American Civil Liberties Union demonstrated that since 2000, there were 31 credible allegations of voter impersonation—out of more than one billion ballots cast. Yet despite this incredibly low risk, thirty-six states have voter identification requirements, including seven states that have restrictive photo ID laws. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, twenty-one Americans do not have government issued-photo identification—that is an estimated eleven percent of American citizens. Those without acceptable forms of identification are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities, low-income Americans, the elderly, and people with disabilities. State legislatures should eliminate restrictive voter identification laws and instead work to expand access to the ballot.¹

**Combat Election Disinformation.** The 2020 Election saw Election Disinformation, the intentional sharing of incorrect information, run rampant—from President Trump spreading disinformation about vote by mail to false information circulating on social media, incorrect information, whether intentional or not, causes confusion, sows distrust in the system, and can reduce turnout. Election disinformation can occur before, during, and after an Election. Indeed, on Election Day in 2020, a disinformation campaign targeted Arab Americans voters in Dearborn, Michigan.

Arab Americans across the city received a text message that stated there was a sensor error with voting machines. The message was written to appear as if it came from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also demonstrated throughout the post-Election Day period, disinformation can have a negative, and potentially dangerous effect on the electoral system as ballots are counted and votes are certified. False allegations of widespread voter fraud are intended to sow chaos and distrust. To combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation, social media platforms should remove any content that shares incorrect information about voting or an election, and instead promote inoculation messaging. Public officials should promptly investigate the source of disinformation campaigns and ensure the public has the correct information.

**Automatic Voter Registration.** Registering to vote by paperwork is antiquated and burdensome. Automated voter registration takes the burden off of the citizen to register to vote, and instead automatically registers a citizen when they have specified government interaction, including contact with the Department of Motor Vehicles, and social services.² Individuals can opt out of automatic registration. This streamlines the registration process and reduces the risk of error. Twenty states plus the District of Columbia have a form of automatic voter

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registration. To expand access and strengthen democracy, all states should enact a form of automatic voter registration.

**Restore Voting Rights.** Felony disenfranchisement laws are remnants of our Jim Crow past. Over five million Americans are unable to vote because of a felony conviction. That is 2.3% of the voting age population. Felony disenfranchisement impacts African Americans at disproportionate rates - One in sixteen Black Americans of voting age is disenfranchised - that is nearly four percent more than that of non-Black Americans. Research from the Sentencing Project noted “[I]t is clear that disparities in the criminal justice system are linked to disparities in political representation.” Our democracy is stronger when all citizens can vote. Congress must pass the Democracy Restoration Act, H.R. 196, and restore voting rights of persons when released from incarceration.

**Extended Early Voting Periods and Vote-By-Mail.** The global COVID-19 pandemic provided for the unique opportunity for states to review access to the ballot in their states. With limitations on social gatherings, states adopted Vote By Mail, and extended, early in person voting. While the pandemic forced localities to review their voting rules and regulations, it also demonstrated how desperately Americans need extended voting periods. Limiting voting to one day produces long lines, reduces voter turnout, and disproportionately impacts low-income individuals who may not be able to take off work for the amount of time it takes to cast a ballot. States should expand early in person voting and vote by mail to ensure all voters are able to cast their ballot.

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