Overcoming Jim Crow to pass S. 1, the For the People Act

S. 1, the For the People Act, is a transformative and crucial step toward dismantling the racist and systemic barriers intentionally built to exclude Black and brown voices. The legislation, already passed by the House, brings together the most effective voting rights expansions and election reforms enacted in states to create national standards that protect our freedom to vote and limit the power of corporations and wealthy donors.

Record high voter turnout in 2020 elections handed a narrow Senate majority to Democrats that provides a pathway for passage of S. 1 and other important policies like the PRO Act, immigration reform, gun violence prevention, civil rights and police reform and climate justice. When it comes to passing S.1, Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer has stated: “Failure is not an option,” and has scheduled the bill for action during the week of June 21.

The Democratic majority can use Senate rules to pass important policies like S. 1 and many more that will improve people’s lives. Doing so will reverse decades of rising abuse of the rules, especially the filibuster, that has broken the US Senate to the point that it now primarily serves the elite and privileged few.

Here is how that could be changed this year to ensure S.1 and other important policies that have been blocked in the past can get a fair debate and vote:

- Senators are elected to debate, deliberate and vote on important policies. It’s the job we the people hired them to do.
- In the Senate, the majority party can bring bills to the floor for consideration with a rule that spells out the debate and voting procedures for a particular bill. The rule can be attached to the bill by a simple majority (all 50 Democratic Senators plus Vice President Kamala Harris) in the Senate.
- One possibility is to bring the For the People Act to the floor under a rule that provides for a full, bipartisan debate and amendments to the bill for specific period of time. For an important bill like S. 1, that could be several weeks of round-the-clock debate, after which we would expect them to move to a yes or no vote on whether to pass the bill.
- This type of rule, sometimes called a talking filibuster, would require senators who oppose the bill to stand up on the Senate floor and publicly state their reasons for opposing the legislation.
- This extended period of debate would last only as long as the bill’s opponents maintain a continuous presence on the Senate floor.
- A talking filibuster will return the Senate to being a more deliberative body, and open the floor for actual bipartisan debate, amendments, and possible compromises.
- Voters will see where their senators stand on voting rights and strengthening our democracy.
• It’s time for Senators to do their job. No job is more important than protecting our right to vote and strengthening our democracy.
• A talking filibuster would not eliminate the filibuster as a procedural tool. But it would restore transparency, debate and a path forward to voting on FTPA and other crucial legislation.
• The talking filibuster enjoys strong bipartisan support: 74% overall and 69% of Republican voters.
• Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR), the lead sponsor of S.1 and longtime champion of reforming Senate rules to ensure the Senate can get the people’s business done, has for many years pointed to the talking filibuster as real progress.