



Hon. Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Charles S. Schumer, Min. Leader
U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Lindsey Graham, Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
290 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Dianne Feinstein, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

July 22, 2020

Dear Senators:

We, national organizations dedicated to the protection of the right to vote for Black people and other communities of color, write to ask the United States Senate to honor the memory and legacy of Representative John Lewis by commencing hearings and scheduling a vote to restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act.

On March 7, 1965, the forces of racism and discrimination attacked and bloodied John Lewis and many others who advocated for the protection of their fundamental right to vote. In the wake of that tragedy, Congress swiftly acted by passing, with bipartisan support, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Section 5 of that law required jurisdictions with a history of discriminatory voting restrictions to seek approval from the Attorney General or a federal court before implementing changes in voting practices or procedures. It was one of the most successful pieces of civil rights legislation in this nation's history, stopping discriminatory practices in such areas as voter registration, voter purges, polling place closings, voting requirements, and district line drawings that had hampered minority populations from participating equally in the electoral process. Section 5 was reauthorized by Congress in 2006 with overwhelming, bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress, including a near-unanimous vote in the Senate.

Unfortunately, in June 2013, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* eviscerated Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, by declaring unconstitutional the formula which defined jurisdictions subject to the law. Within hours of that decision, jurisdictions formerly covered by the law such as Texas and North Carolina took steps to pass and implement laws later found to be discriminatory - only after expensive and time-consuming litigation under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act - which would have been stopped in their tracks had Section 5 been in effect.

This is not a trivial matter. And few knew that more than John Lewis, who was known to say, "some of us gave a little blood for the right to participate in the democratic process." It was only fitting, then, that Rep. Lewis held the gavel as the House of Representatives passed the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2019, 54 years later.

Legislation such as the Voting Rights Advancement Act would create a new coverage formula to determine jurisdictions with repeated voting rights violations that would now be subject to federal preclearance requirements with a 25-year "rolling" look-back, to ensure that only states with a recent history of racially discriminatory voting laws are covered. Moreover, the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2019 would establish a nationwide process to review voting changes, which would focus on the methods and practices historically used to discriminate against voters.

Finally, Congress also needs to pass legislation to provide for the voting reforms that Mr. Lewis advocated for in the Voter Empowerment Act including: online and automatic voter registration; early voting and vote by mail without additional conditions and grants for poll worker recruitment and training.

John Lewis also said that the right to vote is "the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union." The United States Senate has the opportunity to honor the memory of this American hero, by passing the Voting Rights Advancement Act, to make this union more perfect and ensure that all enjoy the equal opportunity to exercise the cherished right to vote.

Sincerely,

Kristen Clarke, President and Executive Director, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Melanie Campbell, President and CEO, Convener, National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
Marc Morial, President, National Urban League
Rev. Al Sharpton, Founder and President, National Action Network
Derrick Johnson, President and CEO, NAACP
Vanita Gupta, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.