



CIRCLE *of* PROTECTION

January 16, 2022

Dear Mr. President and Members of Congress,

As you can see from the following statements, a wide array of church structures and Christian leaders support efforts to protect voting rights. Some church groups and organizations are actively campaigning for Senate passage of voting rights legislation that is currently under consideration, while others are pushing for negotiations to restore the bipartisan consensus that previous voting rights legislation has enjoyed. The right to vote reflects the Biblical doctrine that every human being is created in the image of God. Voting rights are most often obstructed, denied, and made harder for people of color, who are also more likely to be poor. Thus, making voting accessible to all eligible voters is a powerful way to reduce poverty and build a society where all people can flourish. It is time for us to implement the words we remember and cite today from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and apply them to this urgent struggle to protect voting rights.

**The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, Presiding Bishop
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**

As a nation, we are at a critical juncture in protecting our democracy. Fifty-six years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, many in this country still face racial disparities and inequalities in accessing the right to vote. I urge passage of The Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act. If enacted, it would do much to further the ELCA's resolve to call upon local, state, and federal governments to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens and to discourage or eliminate all laws, ordinances or regulations that would have the effect of racial and ethnic discrimination in the exercise of that right. Please join me in praying for our Congress, our president, and members of the Supreme Court. In the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

**The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

A near-sacred cornerstone of this ideal of democracy is the vote. The individual's right to vote, and our respect for the collective will of the people expressed in their votes, are foundational to the temple that is democracy. The vote and the collective will of the people must be upheld as sacred and inviolate; it must be respected and protected, "that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth." Let us be people of conviction and choose the promise that is before us.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS

From "For the Health of the Nation," NAE's policy guide since 2004

While we believe that God can work for his purposes through all forms of political organization, we believe that representative democracy offers the best potential for honoring the fact that every individual is made in the image of God with capacity for creativity, responsible decision-making, pursuing the conditions of biblical justice, and caring for the natural world that God has made.

We are grateful for a constitutional system that provides for separation of powers, elections, limited terms of office and multiple levels of government, all of which distributes power rather than centralizing it in the hands of one person.

To function effectively, a representative democracy requires the active participation of the people, informed by a free and fair press. Public policy should protect the voting rights of all adult citizens, the integrity of the electoral process and the transparency of campaign financing. Where voters are divided into districts, the boundaries should be drawn without regard to partisan considerations.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The National Council of Churches supports passage of The Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act. When the rights of one are denied, we are all impacted. The right to vote is the very center and core of a fair and free democracy. To deny access to the vote is to deny the very humanity and sacredness of those denied. We call upon the Administration and Congress to live up to the promises made by this nation's founders when they asserted that all were created equal and pass voting rights legislation that will remove barriers to the ballot. We call for the passage of these bills by any legislative means necessary, including the end of the filibuster that has historically been used to block the voting rights of African Americans. This is a moment for us to act.

Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Convener

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CLERGY

As the nation celebrates the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded that 161 Years ago, over 600,000 Americans fought against each other and died in a Civil War over the African Americans' humanity and citizenship rights. Today, the fight to secure the right to vote impacts Black Americans and citizens of color, the elderly, disabled, students, and returning citizens.

Access to the ballot is not solely a political issue but also a theological issue because everyone is created in the image of God and deserves to vote their convictions in free, fair, and safe elections. Sadly, following the 2020 national election, over 400 voter restriction laws in 49 states include laws enacted that legalize overturning elections. The United States Senate's refusal to debate federal voting rights legislation – the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act - is an affront to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and others who gave their lives for the right to vote. Even more tragic is that Senate Democrats, like Senator Joe Manchin, Senator Kyrsten Sinema, and others are more committed to retaining the Jim Crow-era filibuster blocking a simple majority vote on national voting rights legislation than to securing our democracy. The National African American Clergy Network is committed to fighting steadfastly alongside diverse Christian organizations in the Circle of Protection to secure the sacred right to vote.

**Bishop E. Anne Henning Byfield, Chairperson, and Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker,
Director/Consultant Social Action Commission**

AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Today, it is apparent that any credible debate or discussion of voting rights legislation is not a priority for Senators of the Republican Party. Passage of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act is critical to safeguard the right to vote, insure access to vote, and provide protection against voter suppression.

It is imperative for leaders in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors to finally “come off the fence” and condemn the spread of more than 600 voter suppression bills, as of May 14, 2021, in 48 states by supporting federal legislation championed by the late Congressman John Lewis — namely H. R. 1 aka “For The People Act”, to protect voting rights. Our stand serves to send a signal to the leadership of the US Senate, Senate Majority Leader Schumer, to move ahead with all deliberate speed to debate and move this legislation, in spite of any partisan caucus.

What is at stake? Democracy is on the ropes. We urge President Joseph Biden to use the power of the Office of the President of the United States to remove the filibuster which is an obstacle to progress.

The time is now. It is our watch!

**Reverend Adam R. Taylor, President
SOJOURNERS**

On behalf of Sojourners, I write in strong support of the House Amendment to the Senate Amendment to H.R. 5746, the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act, which will ensure that voters can safely and freely cast their ballots, protect against election sabotage, stop partisan gerrymandering, and limit the influence of dark money in politics so that billionaires can't buy elections.

21st century voter suppression and election subversion is about who gets to vote, whether your vote is counted, and who counts it. There is no more urgent moral cause right now than protecting the right to vote - which benefits and impacts almost every other justice cause. Members of Congress are elected by the people and for the people to exercise their sacred responsibility and duty to protect our democracy. Any law that restricts the sacred right to vote is unjust because it denies citizens their agency and voice. Put in theological terms, unjust laws assault the imago Dei, the core belief that every person is made in God's divine image.

Nineteen states enacted 34 new laws that restrict access to the ballot box in 2021 alone and more are under consideration today. Many candidates are running for top election offices peddling the Big Lie. States are passing racially-gerrymandered maps that dilute the power of Black and Brown voters. This legislation would fight back against all these attacks and ensure the ability for every American to participate in safe, accessible, and transparent elections.

Our organization fully endorses this bill and urges you to support this legislation. Voting rights is not a partisan issue - it is the foundation of our democracy. Sojourners calls on elected officials to exercise moral courage and treat voting rights like the bipartisan imperative and nonpartisan issue it truly is.

**Amelia Kegan, Legislative Director for Domestic Policy
FRIENDS COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL LEGISLATION**

Our democracy is currently in a perilous place. State legislatures are actively passing laws that will suppress the vote and prevent fair access to the ballot. A sizable portion of the population and numerous elected leaders still refuse to accept the 2020 election results. Free and fair elections are absolutely fundamental to a healthy society. While not a cure-all, the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act is a long overdue step in the right direction. These reforms – through Congressional action – are desperately and immediately needed.

**Rev. Gabriel Salguero, President
NATIONAL LATINO EVANGELICAL COALITION**

While Latino Evangelicals acknowledge that throughout history God has worked through multiple forms of political structuring we also affirm that among political organizations democracies, when justly ordered, offer the foremost potential toward respecting human dignity and honoring the deliberations of citizens. We know that for democracies to flourish the participation of citizens should be protected and not be obstructed. As Latinos, many of whom have experienced disenfranchisement in other parts of the world, we are calling for bi-partisan leadership and support to protect the voting rights of millions.

**Rev. Lori Tapia, National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN THE UNITED STATES AND
CANADA**

It is imperative that every person eligible to vote be able to do so and that access to doing so be protected, especially for the historically marginalized and targeted through voter suppression. Scripture calls us to do justice. and justice is only possible when the systems are just. The sacred act of voting must be at the forefront of the flow of justice.

**Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent Emerita
The Wesleyan Church**

The Wesleyan Church was founded by abolitionists. This was done at great risk including loss of life and resources. Their call was the abolition of slavery and the full inclusion of freed enslaved people as equal participants in American society.

This call continues for the flourishing of a representative democracy and for all people the right to vote with no hindrances.

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

As a pivotal figure in the Civil Rights Movement rooted in his Christian identity, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remained at the forefront of protecting and securing the voting rights of all people regardless of their identity or political affiliation.

Bread for the World, likewise rooted in our Christian identity, remains unwavering in our commitment as a nonpartisan organization to preserve democratic principles and free and fair elections. We will only see a true end to hunger when all people are empowered to raise their voices and leverage their power for the sake of those who need help - today. We therefore seek to promote government accountability and transparency, the rule of law, and bipartisanship, working closely with Republicans and Democrats in Congress and the White House who share in this deep commitment.

Now is the time to hold our government leaders accountable, strengthen our democratic institutions, and promote policies and programs that redress racial, gender, and economic disparities, and alleviate hunger and poverty.

As the nation reflects on the courage and calling of Dr. King, we urge the Senate to pass legislation that will ensure access to the ballot; promote best practices for voter registration and election administration; and enable voting constituents to freely and fairly elect and hold accountable public officials engaged in promoting policies that address hunger and poverty. Our nation's moral and civic duty will impact generations. We therefore pray and urge our leaders to remain faithful and uphold our democratic values."

**Rev. Dr. David Beckmann
Dean's Advisor for Political and Economic Justice, VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY; Co-Chair and Coordinator, CIRCLE OF PROTECTION**

The diverse Christian leaders and organizations in the Circle of Protection have focused our collective advocacy on funding for programs that expand opportunity and reduce

poverty. But all of us understand that poverty and racism are intertwined evils. The suppression of voting among people of color is interconnected with our country's long-standing hesitance to move forward with programs and policies that could realize the dramatic progress against poverty that is possible in our time.

As Pope Francis teaches, COVID and the other problems that discourage us now can be a wake-up call to individuals and nations. I pray that God will open hearts - open doors - to legislative decisions that reflect God's loving intentions for all people. Specifically, I pray that a few Republicans and Democrats will cast unexpected votes for The Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act. And if this bill cannot pass this Congress, members of Congress from both parties and the President should pursue democratic reforms that can.

In any case, we the people of this great democracy should do all we can - especially in this pivotal political year - to promote and protect voting across the country and to elect political representatives who will protect voting and democracy.

Jim Wallis, Inaugural Chair of Faith and Justice, McCourt School of Public Policy, and Founding Director, Center on Faith and Justice, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY; Co-Chair, CIRCLE OF PROTECTION

At this perilous moment in American history, more than 400 laws in 49 states are seeking to restrict voting rights, making it harder to vote for many citizens especially targeting most vulnerable populations, like the elderly, the young, and those who are poor, most particularly people of color—and those laws have already passed in 19 states. Voter suppression, based on race, must be condemned and confronted by all people of faith, as a very assault on *imago dei*, the image of God, that creates all human beings with equal value. The alarming facts of these new restrictive laws now demonstrate their discriminatory danger and our Scriptures clearly oppose it. Democracy and voting rights are for faith leaders, not just a test of politics but a test of faith. And most dangerous in 14 of those states new restrictive laws have passed giving state legislatures, often very partisan, or judges, the right to literally overturn local fair and free elections, at their choosing, if they do not like the free outcome of those election results. That takes a further step from making elections harder for targeted voters to vote, to actually counting or recounting votes in partisan ways and overtly racial ways. That is both morally and theologically unacceptable, and the overturning of free elections must also be made politically unacceptable in democratic elections.

Voting rights in America are in greater danger than anytime since 1965, when our nation committed itself to a multi-racial democracy for the first time in our history. Many efforts to fix those new restrictive laws have now stalled or been stopped in the Senate. Republican obstruction combined with lack of Democrat unity, has allowed the partisan pursuit of power over principle, group interests over the common good, and the preserving of white political power over the sharing of power by all the racial and ethnic communities who are part of our American community. 'Large and wealthy cultural and political forces are directly and strategically seeking to prevent our changing demography from changing our democracy. And we, as people of faith, must not let them do that. Because of the moral role that faith communities must play in any society and here in the United States, this political battle cannot be resolved without the involvement of the religious community intervening in politics on behalf of moral principles; and the dignity, rights, voice, and protection of all of God's children here in the United States.

At this failed moment of politics to resolve the threats to our democracy, the faith community must now intervene, not simply with new pieces of legislation which is the vocation of elected

leaders, but with moral principles and commitments which must guide that legislation. This is not the end of the battle for voting rights and the moral integrity of our democracy, but only the beginning with the hope and promise of direct involvement and specific intervention of multiple faith communities across the country. What we must now pray and act to see is the engagement of multiple faith organizations, re-asserting their commitment to voting rights - even organizations with many other primary commitments and priorities, but all coming together to speak and act on voting rights as the test of democracy at this historic moment.

Many of us as faith leaders will support President Joe Biden and every other Senator, Member of Congress, and local or state official who finds the courage to take a stand for voting rights for all of God's children; and we in the faith community will have their backs if they find the backbone to stand up for democracy. Just as when some other Christians joined the black church led struggle for voting rights in the 1960s, so we as contemporary Christians must all commit ourselves and our souls to the cause of freedom again.