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AN OPEN LETTER TO CONGRESS
NATIONAL COVID-19-NOVEMBER MAIL-IN VOTING

"WE CAN DO BETTER"

"This is ridiculous! I hope they aren't playing politics and risking our lives," to do this, said a Wisconsin voter, on March 7th, during their primary election. The frustration of this senior, female African-American voter was palpable as she stood in the hours-long line waiting; waiting for the only opportunity she was given to exercise her civic duty (USA Today, 2020). She was the face of thousands of other desperate Wisconsinites determined to buttress our democracy -- seemingly all but abandoned by her state and the federal government.

We can do better.

As an African-American, I know all too well the historic challenges to voter access in the face of strategic disenfranchisement. History has been generous in documenting the legacy of poll taxes, and literacy tests, designed to deny the Negroes of yesterday from voter participation. And while Jim Crow obstacles to voter access have been narrowed, these unpatriotic maneuvers have been extended to contemporary times by a few unsavory forces.

In the past, African Americans have died in the quest to vote, to participate in the spirit of our great democracy. Our democracy is great precisely because it strives to be inclusive. Today I address you honorable men and women in the face of a global pandemic that has no cure and no

vaccine. The threat of being exposed to COVID-19, due to the inadequacies of our government, is unacceptable.

And the negative perception of the "ridiculous," as described by the Wisconsinite, is a perception millions of other Americans sensed who witnessed that embarrassing televised interview. Unfortunately, this negative perception is as contagious as COVID itself, and there is no racial boundary to this current predicament.

Torin Fenos, a young white man, another Wisconsinite, wore a cardboard sign that read: "Vote (or) And Die!" Fenos was admist a phalanx of black, white and Latinx voters (McCloone, 2020). Sadly, this history haunts us; vestiges of this history remain with us today.

We can do better.

As the late Martin Luther King so eloquently stated, "An injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere." Today, no race, no class, no orientation is immune from governmental injustice. Wisconsin wasn't an isolated incident. In Texas 350 polling stations were closed. Dean Logan (2020) of the LA Register called it "voter suppression." Again, this is a widely held perception in some pockets of our nation that tugs against congressional popularity. Ari Berman (2020) offered another historical context, stating that "Texas shut 650 polling sites in 1965." The shady parallels overshadow our historic progress.

We can do better.

Like the Jim Crow era, being forced to vote in exchange for life is but an extension of moral failures of the past. As a nation, we've matured from that despicable behavior. I know that the vast majority of you love

country. Your service and sacrifice is not only acknowledged here, but deeply admired and appreciated by many. Yet these sentiments and gestures are far too few. Meanwhile, the COVID threat is real and it not only threatens our health, but our very democracy.

Therefore, we must ensure national access to the polls as a serious counter to protect our democracy and restore trust in the system. Together we must arduously work to remove any strategic and inadvertent obstacles. I am therefore proposing the following to bridge the perceptual gap between you fine folk in Congress and our citizenry.

Given that there is a strong possibility of a new wave of COVID-19 this fall, it would be pragmatic to begin logistical planning for the safest method of carrying out our most fundamental democratic function, the American congressional and presidential elections.

To pull this off, it is an absolute must that states receive the severely needed backing of the federal government to expand (or implement) absentee / mail-in ballots across the country (Collins et al., 2020). While I respect states' rights; this is the time for a comprehensive legislative act that would totally unite us. With COVID there is no Democratic or Republican Party, there is no rich or poor; we must be one united front against this invisible threat. If we are truly in this together, then no other measure would make our unity more apparent than a national voting system.

In the name of logistics, I propose that Congress begin investigating ways to distribute absentee / mail-in ballots, ensuring equity and sufficiency. Accordingly, cost must be secondary to quell the distrust and buoy our democracy.

I applaud the seriousness in which Congress recently united to support business and the American people with the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) (Hayes, et al., 2020); however, the United States would not be the great country that it currently is without a prioritization -- from all of us, across political lines, across ideologies, across generations -- of our democratic process. Within the PPP legislation was an allotment of \$400 million for the March primaries. This was a good start, but according to the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice, our democracy will need an estimated \$2 billion for this wider endeavor (Chen, 2020).

Whether real or imagined, we must get beyond perceptions of "ridiculous," along with perceptions of inequality. This proposal is the most pragmatic path to preserving our democracy. And national absentee / mail-in ballots is the best, safest way, to protect our citizens during this unprecedented global pandemic. This is the best way to do it, because ... we certainly can do better.

References

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