The Vulnerability of Voices from the Margins

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The world, it seems, is swirling in these days with environmental crisis, political turmoil, ever-increasing economic and social disparity, and the continuing toll of a global pandemic. It is a time when we most need thoughtful public engagement and dialogue on all levels of society, in the United States and around the globe. It is a time for empowered connection and visioning ways forward that not only include but center the most marginalized communities throughout the world. And yet, it is at this pivotal time that power is becoming more concentrated in the hands of a few through attacks on the democratic process. It is not coincidence.

The Senate ended its current work period failing a second time to advance S 1, the For the People Act, a bill containing critical voting rights protections and democracy reform. One of those provisions would address racial gerrymandering, which is an even greater danger given the recent release of Census Bureau data reflecting the changing demographics of the U.S. population. Without addressing racial gerrymandering, it becomes possible to redraw districts to further erode the voting power of communities of color, communities that increasingly reflect who we are as a nation.

An essential companion bill to the For the People Act is set to be introduced in the House this week. The John Lewis Voting Rights Act would specifically address the damage done to the 1965 Voting Rights Act by the 2013 Supreme Court Shelby decision. Yet threats to dilute this bill already loom on the horizon.

We have already marked a key milestone for voting rights on August 6 with the 56th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. Without congressional action, the core of the VRA remains gutted by the 2013 Supreme Court decision. August 26 marks Women’s Equality Day, marking the anniversary of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote. Yet we approach a critical 2022 midterm election with fewer voting rights than we had in 1965, and, with the onslaught of state efforts to limit voting rights, even greater disenfranchisement.
In the recent conversations around infrastructure investment, both physical infrastructure and social infrastructure, the issue of voting rights has sometimes been seen as a problematic distraction. We can’t afford to compartmentalize our public policy approaches to the significant challenges that face us. People live their lives at intersections. This is a truth that is powerfully proclaimed by the Poor Peoples Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival. On August 2, over 200 people participated in a civil disobedience witness calling for voter rights protections and a $15 an hour minimum wage and the right to join a union. How do we separate access to the vote, a living wage and worker protections?

I am reminded of a panel discussion on women in governance I attended at the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women. One of the panelists stressed, “We must strive for the highest level of cooperation, not the lowest common denominator.” We the people deserve nothing less than courageous governance in these difficult times, not narrow partisan politics that abandon the common good. The grave global and national challenges before us demand nothing less.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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