

The right to vote only matters if it's enforced

The voting rights provisions of the “For the People Act” should be uncontroversial.

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Assuring all citizens access to the ballot box was once—within living memory—a bipartisan pursuit. The landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 to prohibit racial discrimination passed Congress with a decisive majority. In subsequent years, Congress easily passed laws to improve access to the polls for the disabled and for soldiers and citizens living overseas. In the 1990s it easily passed the Motor Voter Act that required state motor vehicle offices to offer voter registration.

The explicit goal of these laws was to increase the number of registered voters and enhance voter participation. The assumption behind them was this: the right to vote is hollow unless enforced by rules that give people the practical means to exercise that right.

Given that legacy, the voting rights provisions of the For The People Act introduced in Congress in January should be uncontroversial. It aims among other things to bring voting into the 21st century by requiring election officials to offer online registration. It would require states to offer at least 15 days of early voting, to allow voters to register on the day of an election and correct registration information while at the polls, and to restore voting rights to felons after they leave prison.

The bill includes a proposal for making Election Day a federal holiday, which would encourage other employers to follow suit. Since the main reason people give for not voting is that they can't get time off from work, it's a compelling idea—and it would align the United States with most other democracies, where elections are held on a weekend or holiday.

The bill has emerged, however, at a time when opponents of equal voting rights have been emboldened. Since 2010, 25 states have enacted restrictions on voting. States have cut back on early voting opportunities and imposed stringent ID requirements that especially hinder access for low-income voters and racial minorities. After the Supreme Court in 2013 struck down parts of the Voting Rights Act, saying they were no longer needed, some states started aggressively purging their rolls of voters without the oversight of federal officials—again disproportionately jeopardizing the votes of minorities. A *USA Today* study in 2018 found that over the previous six years the nation had lost thousands of Election Day polling sites, the overwhelming number of them in urban areas with large minority populations.

The For The People Act is an ambitious attempt to support democratic participation in the face of such blatantly antidemocratic efforts. One politician has derided the bill as a “power grab”—apparently regarding the expansion of democratic participation as unseemly. If the prospect of more people going to the polls makes any politicians uneasy, they might consider what that says about their own commitment to serving the welfare of all.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Making a right a reality.”