



Demos

THE

POWER

AGENDA

A Framework for
Building People Power



Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive multiracial democracy and economy. We build power with and for Black and brown communities through our strategic partnerships with state-based and grassroots organizations, leveraging more than two decades of experience advancing policy solutions, research, legal advocacy, and narrative strategies.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dēmos extends gratitude and appreciation to the following individuals who shared their insights, feedback and guidance in shaping this framework as a part of our Power Movement Advisory Committee:

- Angela Lang, *Black Leaders Organizing for Communities*
- Andrea Serrano, *OLÉ*
- Miles Tokunow, *OLÉ*
- Justin Allen, *OLÉ*
- Nadira Freeman, *Organize Tennessee*
- Ben Chin, *Maine People's Alliance*
- Lori-Ann Clementson, *Future Currents (formerly: SEJ Leaders Project)*
- Sylvia Albert, *Common Cause*
- Ashley Shelton, *Power Coalition for Equity and Justice*
- Kesi Foster, *Partners for Dignity & Rights (formerly National Economic and Social Rights Initiative)*

We also extend appreciation and thanks to current and former program staff for their collaboration, nimbleness, and thoughtful reflections.



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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

After working more than 20 years advancing equitable policy solutions in the South, where the vestiges of systemic racism were prominent, I learned that people power is a vital ingredient to changing systems and advancing a more inclusive vision for America.

I came to Dēmos determined to keep the people power, especially people of color, in my vision for America so that we all can thrive. Dēmos founders posited that the health and vitality of our democracy are connected to our economy. For nearly 25 years, Dēmos has been working at the intersection of democracy reform, economic justice, and racial justice to ensure everyone has a say in our democracy and a chance in our economy. From debt-free college to getting money out of politics to expanding voting rights, we leveraged litigation and legal advocacy, research, and policy campaigns to reform our economic and democratic systems.

Political power and economic power are inextricably linked. To reach our vision of a just, inclusive multiracial democracy and economy, we must build durable governing power for the people, the *demos*, the root of democracy. In essence, we must rewrite the rules so that people rule. This is what *The Dēmos Power Agenda: A Framework for Building People Power* is all about.

For champions of racial equity and justice, we’ve seen progress. However, the current terrain is tumultuous as we face a shift in the political and public sphere away from equity, inclusion, and freedom for all. Liberty and freedom are universally held values—especially for the rising American electorate.

As America grows more diverse and we welcome a New American *demos* that includes people of color, young people, women, and other formerly marginalized people, we must reject the resurgence of white supremacy, hate, and the threat of authoritarianism. We must reject the fearmongering and racist dog whistles that stoke anxiety and normalize xenophobia, racism, and sexism. We must reject the power hoarding from wealthy elites or policymakers beholden to corporate or monied interests.

Together, we must envision an America where all people—including people of color, immigrants, and people impacted by the criminal legal system—can experience the same liberty and justice that was crafted in the Declaration of Independence but initially excluded us.

As efforts from the conservative right try to silence the telling of American history—through policymaking no less—we must remember our history so that we don’t repeat it. Some of this history includes how the American capitalistic system was built on the enslavement of African people and stolen indigenous lives and land; policies that restricted the economic mobility of Black and brown people and women through exclusionary laws; and domestic terror perpetuated by white supremacists on Black and brown Americans trying to exercise their right to vote, work with dignity, or demand fair wages.

As Dr. King declared, “power without love is reckless and abusive.” We believe love, inclusion, interdependence, and equity are the values that will drive our mission to shift and build power to the people—particularly Black and brown people. Our fates continue to be linked and our collective liberation remains our rallying cry.



Taifa S. Butler

President, Dēmos

INTRODUCTION

For nearly 25 years, Dēmos has worked at the intersection of democracy reform, economic justice, and racial justice.

Our close ties and partnerships with state-based and grassroots organizations are important to our work, centering the leadership and experiences of those most impacted by regressive systems and policies in the fight for change.

Our democracy is at a critical juncture, and the stakes for Black and brown communities are high. The resurging threat of white supremacy and authoritarianism has undermined decades of political and economic progress. Our grassroots partners and racial justice champions have long understood the necessity of power-building for systemic change. Their successes and challenges in the long fight to secure political access and economic opportunity necessitate a deeper commitment from organizations like Dēmos to build and sustain power for Black and brown communities.

The Dēmos Power Agenda: A Framework for Building People Power reflects our affirmative vision for creating a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy and economy by **building civic, political, and economic power for all**. This requires structural reforms that include goals and interventions that restore and expand voting rights, strengthen worker rights and protections, and shift power to the people.

Power at Dēmos

At Dēmos, we define power as the “ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain, and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions, and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision makers that change systems.”¹

Our Power Agenda Framework envisions:

- Economic Security for All
- Economic Mobility for All
- Full Political Participation
- An Inclusive and Expansive Electorate
- A Representative and Accountable Government

Despite the United States becoming more diverse,² our country’s long history of exclusionary policies means that Black and brown communities bear the brunt of interlocking systems of inequality. Exploitative labor laws have concentrated wealth in the hands of the top 10 percent of households,³ creating an economy that leaves millions of families struggling to make ends meet. *Citizens United* and other Supreme Court decisions gutting campaign finance restrictions have entrenched the outsized role of money in politics, creating a democracy in which economic power can translate directly into political power. **Black and brown people remain overrepresented in low-wage industries⁴ and underrepresented at the polls⁵ and in the corridors of power.”⁶**

To build a representative, multiracial democracy and economy for the *demos*—the people—we must advance an agenda focusing on the policies and structural changes that uplift the wisdom and insight of state-based and grassroots leaders and work with policymakers to drive solutions where people can wield full economic and political power to build thriving communities.

The Dēmos Power Agenda: A Framework for Building People Power offers a roadmap for our shared future.

ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR ALL



Our economy leaves working families with inadequate pay and unaffordable goods and services, making it difficult to make ends meet. Structural racism in our economic institutions makes economic security even harder for Black and brown communities.

Dēmos envisions an economy where all people can regularly meet their daily needs.

To get to economic security for all, Dēmos is focused on:

- Ensuring all workers, particularly Black and brown workers, earn no less than a thriving wage without overwork or exploitation.
- Rebalancing power in the workplace so workers get an equitable share of the value they create in our economy and greater control over how work fits into their lives.
- Ensuring that all individuals have access to the goods and services that support a comfortable standard of living.

Where We Are and How We Got Here

Throughout history, workers have struggled to get by in an economy that demands labor for our nation's economic growth⁷ but offers inadequate pay in return. At the same time our government, often by intent, has failed to intervene in our economy on behalf of workers adequately. Propped up and protected by government at all levels, chattel slavery drove regional and national economic growth in the 19th century through the stolen labor of millions of Black and Indigenous people.⁸ Factories fueled industrial growth during the 19th and early 20th centuries but subjected factory workers—a disproportionate number of whom were immigrants—⁹ to substandard wages and abysmal working conditions with no federal oversight.¹⁰ The federal government's Bracero Program and Operation Bootstrap recruited Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, respectively, into low-wage, exploitative work in the agriculture and railroad industries to sustain our economy during and after World War II.¹¹ Even when the government has sought to intervene on behalf of workers, it has fallen short. Designed to boost wages and the standard of living for workers, New Deal

legislation excluded from its protections industries where Black workers were heavily concentrated.¹²

Despite recent progress, many workers still don't make enough to get by. Wages—the primary source of income for most people¹³—have stagnated for most of the last several decades.¹⁴ Even with recent real wage growth, particularly for low-wage workers, many people still struggle to cover their basic living expenses.¹⁵ The government's continued failure to meaningfully update employment laws that boost worker pay, such as the federal minimum wage, has left workers worse off.¹⁶

And the picture is bleaker for Black and brown workers. Occupational segregation and the devaluation of work performed predominantly by Black and brown people, immigrants, and women, such as care work, leaves these workers concentrated in low-wage industries.¹⁷ Statutory exclusions for overtime and job-protected leave carve out a disproportionate number of Black and brown workers, leaving them vulnerable to overwork and with limited time to care for themselves or their families.¹⁸ All this is compounded by higher rates of corporate wage theft and violations in industries dominated by Black and brown workers.¹⁹

Rethinking How We View Economic Security

Frequently, economic security is narrowly focused on whether individuals can meet their basic physical needs for survival (e.g., food and housing) and continue employment (e.g., reliable transportation or childcare). This decenters people and their full range of needs, reducing them to their productive value and creating low expectations for a standard of living. We can do better.

In the world's largest economy, economic security should mean a comfortable standard of living where individuals and families have the means and time to meet their social, emotional, and physical needs.

Over the last several decades, workers have been denied their fair share of the value they add to our economy.

Between 1979 and 2018, worker productivity increased by 70 percent while average hourly compensation increased by only 12 percent.²⁰ In 1978, CEOs made about 30 times the average compensation of workers in their industry. By 2020, CEOs made nearly 399 times more than average workers.²¹

For decades, corporations and weak labor laws have undermined workers' bargaining power, depressing wages, and limiting the share of economic growth that goes to workers. Anti-union consulting firms leverage weak labor law to help corporations bust unions with near impunity.²² Supreme Court decisions have eroded what unions can bargain over²³ and limited their tools

for exerting power.²⁴ These anti-union attacks rob millions of workers of the union wage advantage: the median union worker is paid 20 percent more than their non-union counterpart.²⁵

Essential goods and services have become more expensive, less accessible, and less reliable.

Over 40 percent of renters in the U.S. spend a third of their income on housing costs.²⁶ For single-parent households, the cost of infant childcare represented 25 to 75 percent of their income in 2021.²⁷ And the lack of affordable essentials forces many to make hard decisions. According to Federal Reserve survey data from 2022, 66 percent of households reduced or stopped the use of a product when met with higher prices. Half of households surveyed reported reducing their savings.²⁸ Nearly 20 percent worked more or "got another job."²⁹

Corporations providing essential goods and services are incentivized to deliver profits for their shareholders, not value, quality, and access to consumers. Corporate consolidation and greed can leave communities with unaffordable goods and services from the private market.³⁰ As a stark example, corporate profits became a significant driver of inflation as the pandemic waned, contributing to over 50 percent of price increases.³¹ When this happens, low-income families might go without or choose poor substitutes.³²

Robust investments in public goods—the goods and services produced and distributed by the government—are critical for ensuring communities have greater access to quality and affordable options.³³ Unfortunately, for decades, the government at all levels

has failed to invest sufficient resources into the essential goods and services that communities depend on to thrive. And all too often, access to public goods are burdened by policies limiting accessibility. For example, government-subsidized or provided housing, healthcare, and food assistance are restricted to individuals meeting certain conditions for eligibility frequently premised on racist narratives around deservedness.³⁴ Similarly, without adequate public funds, government at all levels have given private companies control over administering public resources that should be distributed as public goods, leaving residents with less.

What This Means For Our Families, Communities, And Our Nation

EFFECTS ON OUR ECONOMY

When families don't have enough to get by, they have limited power to make choices that contribute to a better standard of living—and thus a better quality of life.³⁵ For example, the lack of universal paid leave means low-wage workers who can't afford to miss a paycheck are less likely to take time off from work when they need it, such as to care for a loved one.³⁶

Economic insecurity also affects our local and national economies. We know that when workers, especially low-wage workers, earn more, they gain more consumption power. With this, they spend more money in their local economies on small purchases like dining at restaurants, and big purchases such as a family car.³⁷ This local

economic activity stimulates job growth, creating exponential benefits for communities.³⁸ At the national level, the effects of economic insecurity are staggering. According to a 2018 study, child poverty alone costs this country over \$1 trillion a year, including costs related to “lower economic productivity.”³⁹

EFFECTS ON OUR DEMOCRACY

Economic barriers to voting compound legal barriers, including voter suppression laws, to make it harder for low-income people to cast their vote, compared to their higher-income counterparts.⁴⁰ For example, lack of access to reliable transportation, affordable childcare, and paid leave from work makes it more difficult for low-income individuals to show up to the polls.⁴¹ Black, Indigenous, and Latino individuals are both more likely to have low incomes and to be targets of racist voter suppression. Where voter turnout among low-income people is lower, our elected officials feel less accountable to them to keep their jobs and deprioritize the needs of low and middle-income constituents. This results in economic policies that benefit the wealthy elite and worsen the plight of the economically insecure.⁴²



ECONOMIC MOBILITY FOR ALL



Our economy fosters deep income and wealth inequality, making it difficult for working families to reach or stay in the middle class. Resource-depressed communities and structural racism in our economic institutions have made economic mobility much less likely for Black and brown people.

Dēmos envisions an economy where everyone has an opportunity to improve their economic situation over time and each generation is better off than the last.

To secure economic mobility for all, Dēmos is focused on:

- Ensuring all individuals have an opportunity to accumulate wealth through savings, investments, and fair tax treatment.
- Investing robustly in public goods to promote economic mobility for children, families, and communities, particularly Black and brown communities.
- Ensuring all children can transition into adulthood with the economic support that puts them on the right path toward income growth and wealth accumulation.

Where We Are and How We Got Here

Many people don't see significant increases in their income or wealth throughout their lives—and don't see their children better off than they were.⁴³ Communities of color fare worse.⁴⁴ For example, 60 percent of Black adults who were in the lowest-income quintile in 2000 stayed there over the next 14 years.⁴⁵ Even Black and Hispanic individuals in higher income distributions are more likely to slide down the income ladder than their white counterparts.⁴⁶ Only about 50 percent of adults born in the 1980s earn more than their parents,⁴⁷ and Black families are 16 times more likely than white families to experience third-generation poverty.⁴⁸

This lack of economic mobility both fuels and reflects significant wealth and income inequality. In 2022, the top 1 percent of wealthy households held nearly 14 percent of wealth; the bottom 50 percent held about 3 percent.⁴⁹ In 2022, white households held about 85 percent of wealth, compared to 6 percent for Black and Latino households.⁵⁰ Similarly in 2022, the top 5 percent of households brought in nearly 24 percent of all income, compared to 3

percent of total income going to the lowest fifth of households.⁵¹

Black and brown people have struggled with economic mobility within financial and tax systems that limit opportunities to save, invest, and build assets. Private banks have a long, well-documented history of excluding Black and brown people from basic financial services. Private banks denied loans to Black applicants in “redlined” neighborhoods, excluding them from the opportunity to purchase a home and build wealth.⁵² Private banks targeted Black and brown communities for predatory subprime mortgage loans, and these communities became among the hardest hit during the mass foreclosures of the Great Recession.⁵³

Black and brown communities continue to face obstacles to accessing even the most basic financial services that promote saving and wealth-building.⁵⁴ Black and brown individuals face higher costs to “open and maintain” a basic checking account in their communities⁵⁵ and are nearly twice as likely to pay overdraft fees than their white counterparts.⁵⁶ Our credit reporting system “disproportionately represents Black and Latino loan applicants as ‘riskier’ customers” and further disadvantages consumers without a robust

credit history—who are more likely to be Black or Latino.⁵⁷ According to a 2022 study from the Federal Reserve, at all income levels, Black and Hispanic people are denied credit at higher rates than their white counterparts.⁵⁸

Our tax system also worsens the racial wealth gap. According to a recent Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy report, regressive state and local tax systems in the vast majority of states are making inequality worse.⁵⁹ For example, state taxes on groceries have a greater impact on low-income families, who spend a far higher percentage of their income on groceries.⁶⁰ Similarly, wage income tends to be taxed at a higher rate than other forms of income, such as dividends and long-term capital gains.⁶¹ Because Black and Hispanic families tend to receive more income from wages and less income from dividends and capital gains, they are effectively taxed at a higher rate.⁶²

Black and brown people are overrepresented in resource-depressed communities with fewer opportunities.⁶³ Where we live, especially as children, has a great impact on upward mobility.⁶⁴ Research shows that local communities that spend more per capita on low-income families have higher rates of upward mobility.⁶⁵ But decades of racial segregation have left Black and brown families concentrated in under-resourced communities. Without robust and equitably dispersed public investments from the government, these communities will continue to struggle.

Limited opportunities to save have made it harder for Black and brown families to start their adult children on

the path toward economic success. Young adults are both at their lowest earning potential⁶⁶ and at a key period to take advantage of education, training, and job opportunities that can increase their income over time.⁶⁷ Economic choices during these years can be critical. Adults experience more economic mobility, upwards or downwards, in their 20s and 30s than later in life.⁶⁸

But it can be difficult for young adults to take on the costs of living or pursuing education and training programs alone. An estimated 15 percent of adults 18 to 29 received financial help from their families or friends.⁶⁹ However, families that struggle with economic security often lack the savings or income to provide help or may even need support from their young adult children.⁷⁰ This is more pronounced in communities of color. For example, over half of adults who provide voluntary economic support to their parents are Hispanic.⁷¹ Black mothers rely more on their children for financial support as compared to their white counterparts.⁷²

What This Means For Our Families, Communities, And Our Nation

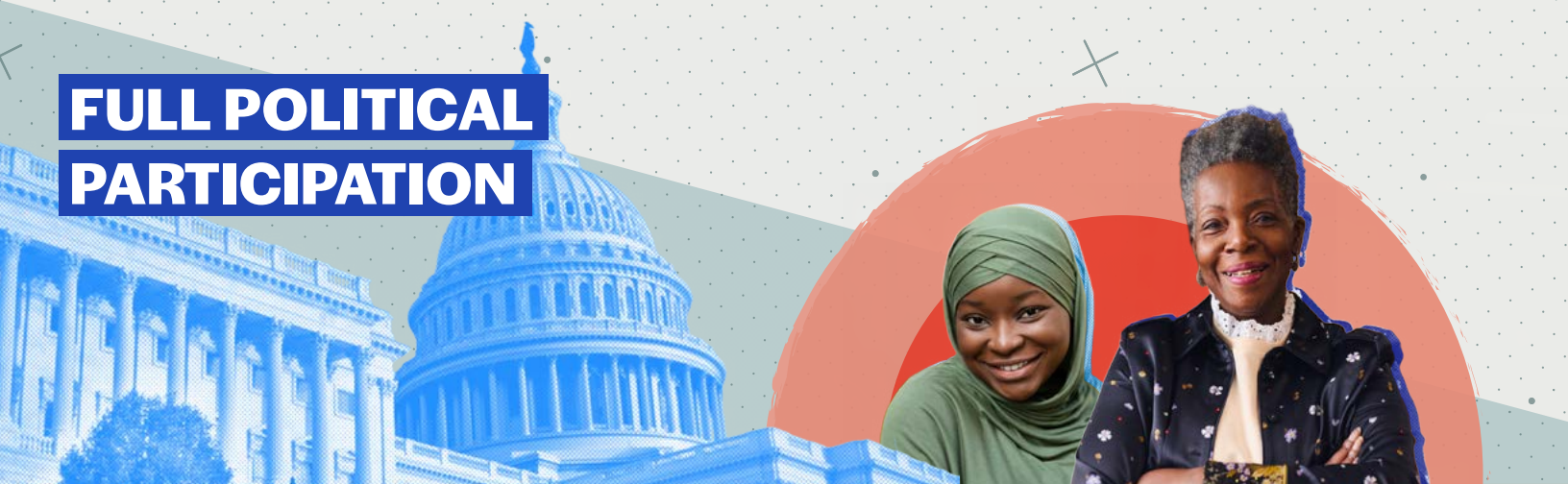
When families lack economic mobility, they have less agency to make decisions that can improve their standard of living over time. For example, this means less ability to choose whether to move to a house in a better neighborhood with better schools.⁷³

Economic immobility is also a clear signal that our government's decisions regarding our economy, from how financial institutions are regulated to how government funds are spent, primarily benefit only a few.⁷⁴ This leaves us all worse off. When communities have limited resources and opportunities for mobility, it raises collective costs and lowers access to quality choices for everyone.⁷⁵ When people, including Black and brown people, have limited opportunities to earn more later in life, our economy loses out on the increased tax revenue and consumer buying power.

In contrast, widespread economic mobility fuels economic growth. Furthermore, when there is more economic mobility, our nation's overall economic growth is felt more evenly across communities, leading to a higher standard of living for more people.⁷⁶



FULL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Structural inequality and racism hinder Black and brown people from wielding their full political power. From voter suppression tactics to laws that criminalize protest, our political infrastructure does not enable all people to participate in our democracy fully and freely.

Dēmos envisions a democracy where systems are designed to encourage and cultivate the fullest expression of political voice by all.

To ensure full political participation for all, Dēmos is focused on:

- Building systems and institutions where people influence the policies that shape their lives and their communities, including through direct action and ballot initiatives.
- Expanding access to voting and centering pro-voter policies that reduce the racial voter turnout gap, including robust language access.
- Guaranteeing fair and equal representation for Black and brown communities by passing state and federal legislation that strengthens the right to vote, protects against racial vote dilution,

and restores and supplements the Voting Rights Act.

- Challenging voter suppression laws and other anti-democratic practices that target Black and brown communities, including laws that restrict and criminalize protest.

Where We Are and How We Got Here

Black and brown people lack full political power in America. Our elections are a striking example of this. Voter turnout data from recent elections shows a severe and persistent turnout gap between whites and Black, Latino, and Asian American voters.⁷⁷ In the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterm elections, Latino and Asian American turnout was less than half that of white voters.⁷⁸ Even in the historic 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Black turnout lagged substantially behind white turnout, with a turnout gap of over 10 percent.⁷⁹ And in the 2020 presidential election—when Black, Latino, and Asian American voters all turned out in record numbers⁸⁰—white turnout still surpassed Black and brown turnout by over 12 percentage points.⁸¹

The racial turnout gap persists because Black

and brown voters continue to face numerous social and structural barriers to full political participation, including economic barriers.

For example, lack of access to reliable transportation, affordable childcare, and paid leave from work make showing up to the polls more difficult for low-income voters⁸²—and Black, Latino, and Indigenous voters are more likely to be low-income.⁸³ Compounding these barriers are voter suppression laws that proliferate in the wake of high Black and brown voter turnout⁸⁴ and disproportionately burden Black and brown voters.⁸⁵ For example, after high Black voter participation in the 2020 presidential elections and the 2021 Senate runoff elections,⁸⁶ Georgia legislators passed S.B. 202, a 98-page omnibus elections bill that, among other things, imposed numerous restrictions on voting by mail⁸⁷—a method of voting that Black and Asian American voters have used at persistently higher rates than white voters in recent elections.⁸⁸

While racist election practices have long been a part of American history, today's voter suppression laws result directly from the Supreme Court's undoing of the Voting Rights Act's (VRA) most powerful tool—the preclearance provision.⁸⁹ For nearly 50 years, preclearance acted as a bastion against voter

suppression by prohibiting states with a history of racial discrimination from changing their voting laws or redrawing district maps without the federal government's approval.⁹⁰ But the Supreme Court gutted the preclearance provision a decade ago in *Shelby County v. Holder*, opening the floodgates for states to pass discriminatory laws that make accessing the ballot harder,⁹¹ especially for Black voters in the South.⁹² The Black-white turnout gap has widened post-*Shelby County* in several Southern states, including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas.⁹³ Since 2013, at least 29 states have passed 94 laws that make voting more difficult.⁹⁴ The trend has accelerated recently, especially in red states after the 2020 Presidential election. In 2023 alone, at least 14 states passed 17 laws restricting voting.⁹⁵ The elimination of preclearance has also cleared the way for lawmakers to freely manipulate the redistricting process to strip Black and brown voters of the power to elect representatives of their choice. As of July 2023, a total of 74 lawsuits were filed challenging congressional or legislative maps in 27 states as racially discriminatory or partisan gerrymanders, and in some instances both.⁹⁶

Making matters worse, the Supreme Court, in *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, also weakened the VRA's main enforcement mechanism—Section 2—diminishing Black and brown voters' ability to contest voting rights violations in court.⁹⁷ While Section 2 remains a critical tool for protecting voters from discriminatory practices, it remains vulnerable to further

and more aggressive attacks. In a decision that radically departs from decades of legal precedent, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals recently held that only the Department of Justice can sue to enforce voting rights under Section 2⁹⁸—even though voters and other private parties have been plaintiffs in most of the successful Section 2 cases filed in the last 40 years.⁹⁹

And even where our government is not actively erecting barriers, it does far too little to encourage and facilitate the full political participation of all communities. Since *Shelby County*, Congress has failed to pass any legislation, such as the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act,¹⁰⁰ to restore and strengthen key provisions of the VRA, including preclearance. Nor has Congress passed legislation that moves beyond merely rooting out discrimination in voting to advance policies that proactively expand ballot access and close the turnout gap. The lack of baseline national voting standards has left voters at the whims of state legislatures, making access to the ballot vary widely across states. For example, only about half of states offer automatic or same-day voter registration.¹⁰¹ Language access also remains an area of deep underinvestment despite evidence of its positive impact on voter participation by Latino, Asian American, and American Indian and Alaskan Native communities.¹⁰² In Georgia, for example, Gwinnett County is the sole county—out of 159 counties—that is mandated by Section 203 of the VRA to offer limited English proficient (LEP) Latino voters an official ballot in Spanish, leaving the 52,920 LEP

Latino voters who live outside of Gwinnett County uncovered.¹⁰³ This means that approximately three out of every four of Georgia's LEP Latino voters are forced to use English-only ballots.¹⁰⁴

The denial of political voice to Black and brown people also extends far beyond the ballot box. Laws that restrict and criminalize protest and other means of organizing also threaten Black and brown political power-building. Black and brown leaders who are on the front lines of fighting for racial justice are increasingly at risk of state-sanctioned harm. Anti-protest laws often come on the heels of large-scale protests,¹⁰⁵ like how voter suppression laws emerge after strong Black and brown voter turnout. For example, after the Trump administration's Muslim ban sparked protests at airports across the country in 2017, the Denver International Airport began requiring protestors to seek preapproval for any demonstration.¹⁰⁶ The Black Lives Matter protests that erupted after George Floyd's murder in 2020—which included as many as 26 million participants nationally¹⁰⁷—similarly prompted a spate of anti-protest legislation.¹⁰⁸ Since 2017, 45 states have considered 285 bills that restrict the right to protest; 42 of these bills were enacted while 24 are still pending.¹⁰⁹ Recent crackdowns on organizing efforts have also not been limited to the right to protest. States are also criminalizing community-based efforts to assist or mobilize voters. In Florida, lawmakers banned noncitizens from handling voter registrations.¹¹⁰ And in Georgia, providing water or food to voters waiting in long lines at the polls is now a crime.¹¹¹

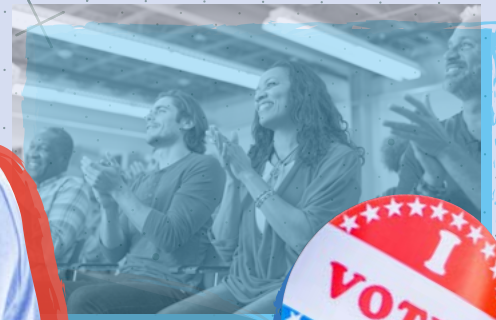
What This Means For Our Families, Communities, And Our Nation

When all people are not fully included and active in our democracy, the policies that shape and govern our lives will not reflect the richness and diversity of our country. Even though America is more racially and ethnically diverse than it has ever been,¹¹² the white electorate still has an outsized role in determining election outcomes and shaping public policy. This political inequality results in a government that is less representative of and responsive to Black and brown communities, which in turn perpetuates racial disparities in economic security and mobility.

Our systems and institutions do not promote or support the full political participation of Black and brown people at the polls or beyond. Indeed, our policymakers too often erect barriers to actively suppress Black and brown voter turnout and thwart other exercises of political power, such as protesting. Beyond the direct negative effects of restrictive voting laws and anti-protest laws, these suppressive tactics can also cause people to lose faith in our democratic systems, further deterring their political participation. Additionally, restrictions on political expression lock organizers, advocates, and lawmakers into battles to protect the status quo, taking time and resources away from efforts to expand political power for Black and brown people.



AN INCLUSIVE AND EXPANSIVE ELECTORATE



America systematically denies the right to vote to millions, creating a democracy that neither includes nor represents all of us. Both the immigration and criminal legal systems persist as powerful tools to deem Black and brown people unworthy of participating in our democracy.

Dēmos envisions a democracy where all people can fully participate, and immigrants and people impacted by the criminal legal system are explicitly embraced.

To ensure an inclusive and expansive electorate, Dēmos is focused on:

- Advancing the political power and civic participation of immigrants and systems-impacted people.
- Abolishing penal disenfranchisement at both the state and federal levels.
- Reducing barriers to citizenship and centering immigrant justice so all people can freely and actively participate in our democracy without fear.

Where We Are and How We Got Here

Voting—and the right to choose our representatives—is the cornerstone of our democracy. **Yet, government at all levels has long denied the right to vote to millions of Black and brown people who call the U.S. home through laws that determine who gets to belong.** This political exclusion is perfected by tying the right to vote to citizenship and then exploiting the criminal legal and immigration systems to either subjugate people to second-class citizenship or exclude them altogether. Today, our democracy excludes the voices of over 4.6 million Americans relegated to second-tier citizenship through felony disenfranchisement¹¹³ and an estimated 19.7 million immigrants who have not attained citizenship.¹¹⁴

Felony disenfranchisement first became weaponized in the post-Reconstruction era when the recognition of Black people as citizens and the expansion of voting rights to Black men prompted white-led governments to devise new ways to suppress Black political power.¹¹⁵ Southern white legislatures manipulated existing felony

disenfranchisement laws and criminal codes to target crimes they believed were predominantly committed by Black people, including petty theft.¹¹⁶ Felony disenfranchisement laws became a central part of the Jim Crow regime¹¹⁷ and laid the groundwork for racist “law and order” policies in the 1960s and 1970s. This in turn led to the current era of mass incarceration, where a majority of incarcerated people are Black.¹¹⁸ Today, Black and brown people continue to be overrepresented in America’s sprawling prison systems. While Black people are just 13 percent of the total population, they represent more than 35 percent of the nation’s incarcerated population.¹¹⁹

Together, the rise of mass incarceration and felony disenfranchisement have become an essential means of suppressing Black political power and maintaining white supremacy.¹²⁰ Currently, one in 19 Black voters is disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, compared to one in 50 of the general population.¹²¹ The impact is even more severe in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia, where one in 10 Black adults is disenfranchised.¹²² While data on other communities of color are not as robust, studies show

Latino voters also experience felony disenfranchisement at higher rates in at least 31 states.¹²³ Even though all but two states currently enact some form of felony disenfranchisement,¹²⁴ studies indicate that most Americans support voting rights for the formerly incarcerated.¹²⁵ The success of the 2018 Florida ballot initiative Amendment Four in Florida bears this out. A citizen-led ballot initiative to restore the right to vote to most Floridians with criminal convictions who had completed their sentences,¹²⁶ Amendment Four passed by nearly 65 percent with bipartisan support.¹²⁷ The Florida Legislature swiftly curtailed this victory, however, with a law that bars formerly incarcerated people from voting if they have not paid off court-imposed legal fees associated with their felony convictions.¹²⁸ Laws that impose this type of modern-day poll tax on formerly incarcerated voters are widespread. As of 2019, 30 states explicitly or implicitly condition the restoration of voting rights on payment of criminal legal debt.¹²⁹

Our immigration system similarly locks Black and brown people out of political power by erecting barriers to citizenship while denying noncitizens the right to vote. Historically, race and eligibility for citizenship have been tightly intertwined. Enslaved Black people were denied basic personhood and citizenship, and the first federal law governing naturalized citizens limited eligibility to “free White persons.”¹³⁰ Even after the Fourteenth Amendment granted eligibility for birthright citizenship to all people born in the U.S., racial bans remained in place well into the 20th century, with laws against the naturalization of Asian immigrants eliminated

only in the 1940s and 1950s.¹³¹ And citizenship for Native Americans—which the U.S. Supreme Court had blocked in the 1880s—was not formalized in federal law until 1924.¹³²

Today, noncitizens are barred from voting in all federal elections and can only vote in local elections in 17 jurisdictions.¹³³ These restrictions primarily impact Black and brown communities, as the vast majority of immigrants in the United States are from non-European countries, with the largest percentages migrating from Asia and Latin America.¹³⁴ Noncitizens have not always been excluded from the electorate, however.¹³⁵ Indeed, the United States has a long history of noncitizen voting in local, state, and national elections that stretches as far back as the colonial period.¹³⁶

Before 1926, noncitizens voted in as many as 40 states and federal territories, though their voting rights ebbed and flowed throughout the 19th century.¹³⁷ The ebbs and flows of noncitizen voting, and its ultimate elimination in 1926, coincided with different sociopolitical events and political trends in American history.¹³⁸ For example, in the period leading up to the Civil War, Southern states fiercely opposed extending the right to vote to immigrants because newer immigrants generally did not support slavery.¹³⁹ And around the turn of the 20th century, a massive influx of darker immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe triggered a large-scale reversal of noncitizen voting rights, culminating in a significant loss of political power for immigrants.¹⁴⁰ The same racism and xenophobia that gutted voting rights for noncitizens also ended an era of unrestricted immigration, paving the

way for current exclusionary immigration policies.¹⁴¹

Today’s restrictive immigration system entrenches the disenfranchisement of immigrants by making citizenship—and the full rights and privileges that come with it—unattainable for many. Our government denies a pathway to citizenship to over 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States,¹⁴² preventing them from fully and freely participating. In addition, over 8.8 million immigrants are eligible for citizenship but have not yet completed the naturalization process. Advocates cite language barriers and the high costs of naturalization as two of the biggest obstacles to becoming a citizen.¹⁴³

What This Means For Our Families, Communities, And Our Nation

As Florida Rights Restoration Coalition’s Executive Director Desmond Meade has said: “A more inclusive democracy is a more vibrant democracy and a more vibrant democracy is good for everybody.”¹⁴⁴ When our laws deny immigrants and systems-impacted people the right to vote, the result is a government that does not represent over 24.3 million people who live in America—who are disproportionately people of color. These categorical exclusions of people from our electorate violate the founding principle of no taxation without representation and omit the voices of those whose lives may be most directly impacted from policy decisions. For example, in Texas—where one in six

residents is an immigrant and undocumented immigrants comprise 33 percent of the immigrant population¹⁴⁵—the state legislature recently passed a radical anti-immigrant measure that unconstitutionally empowers state law enforcement to deport asylum seekers.¹⁴⁶ And in Tennessee, where over 470,000 people are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction,¹⁴⁷ the Secretary of State recently made the process for restoring voting rights to formerly incarcerated people even more difficult and onerous.¹⁴⁸ Yet noncitizens and systems-impacted people are often denied one of the most effective tools for holding elected leaders accountable for policy decisions that shape their communities—the right to vote.



A REPRESENTATIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT



Corporate and wealthy elites have a stronghold on the levers of government, creating government policies that benefit only the few, often at the expense of the public.

Dēmos envisions a government that embeds public participation in its decision-making and centers the will and well-being of the people.

To ensure that our government is representative and accountable to its people, Dēmos is focused on:

- Investing in public campaign financing programs that enable more Black and brown candidates to run for office and foster deeper partnerships between elected leaders and their communities.
- Advancing Supreme Court expansion and other necessary reforms to stop the far-right corporate takeover of the federal judiciary.
- Ensuring the public, especially Black and brown communities, are at the decision-making table so decisions benefit the public and reflect the will of the people.

- Creating greater transparency and legibility in the government’s decision-making processes so the public knows when and how to make their voices heard and can hold government leaders accountable for their decisions.

Where We Are and How We Got Here

Corporations and the wealthy elite have enormous influence over the policy choices our government makes—choices that shape the quality of life for everyone, especially for Black and brown people. The United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse,¹⁴⁹ yet Black and brown communities struggle to build economic and political power. This is partly due to the outsized role of big money in politics.¹⁵⁰ While nearly 41 percent of Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than white,¹⁵¹ our government and elected officials continue to cater to white and wealthy populations.¹⁵²

The outsized role of money in politics creates a democracy in which economic power translates directly into political power, including the power to choose and influence decision-makers. The Supreme Court’s

Citizens United decision in 2010 cinched the power of wealthy special interests to set the policy agendas in Washington and state legislatures across the country by throwing open the doors for unlimited corporate campaign spending.¹⁵³ “Wealthy, white individuals dominate campaign funding.”¹⁵⁴ In the 2022 cycle, 465 billionaires poured a whopping \$881 million into federal elections, representing 7.4 percent of all the money received from any source by candidates, parties, and political action committees (PACs).¹⁵⁵ Large donors are overwhelmingly white, and their contributions are an outsized amount compared to the general population.¹⁵⁶ As a result, elected representatives prioritize the policy agenda of their predominately white donor base; fewer Black and brown people run for office, and those who do raise less money than their white counterparts.¹⁵⁷ Black and brown people are underrepresented in our country’s most powerful decision-making bodies. For example, today, the U.S. Senate has just six Latino senators, four Black senators, two Asian American senators, and one American Indian senator.¹⁵⁸ And in 2021, every state legislature was whiter than the population it represented.¹⁵⁹ This lack of representation has direct policy outcomes. For example, the New

American Leaders Project found that state legislatures with no Latino or Asian American representatives were “the most likely to pass punitive anti-immigration policy.”¹⁶⁰

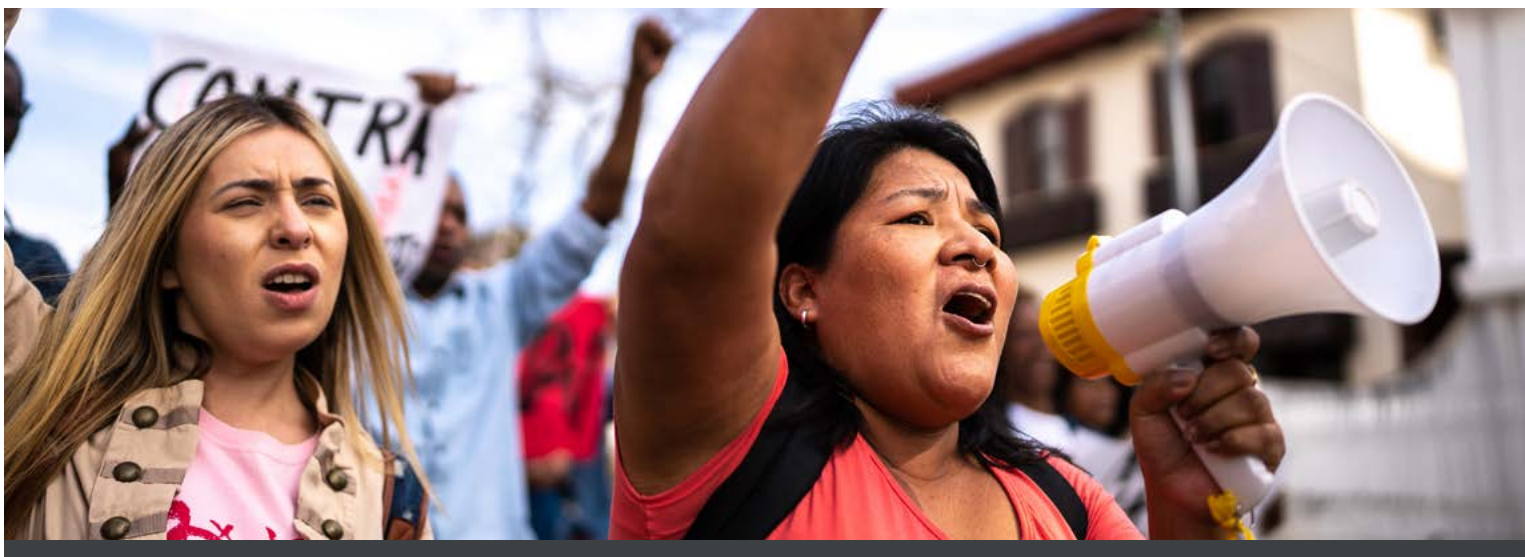
Megadonors also wield enormous influence over the federal judiciary, including the Supreme Court. Far-right interest groups have pumped billions into a multi-decade campaign to fill the federal judiciary with hand-picked, conservative judges, culminating in an ultraconservative Supreme Court majority and the capture of many lower courts.¹⁶¹ This power grab is allowing extremist judges to legislate from the bench, leading to the gutting of voting rights, erosion of labor and environmental regulations, and the end of the constitutional right to abortion.¹⁶² These judges are also working to further concentrate power in their own hands by moving decision-making away from democratically elected officials and increasing the influence of corporations and megadonors in our democracy through decisions that erode agency rulemaking and Congressional lawmaking powers.¹⁶³ To make matters

worse, the Supreme Court lacks a binding code of ethics. Little prevents the Justices from fraternizing and receiving lavish gifts and trips from the wealthy elite and providing advantageous decisions in return.¹⁶⁴ The Supreme Court’s half-hearted attempts to address its ethics crisis has led to minimal change, allowing the undue influence of ultrawealthy megadonors like Harlan Crow to continue.¹⁶⁵

Corporations and the wealthy elite also use their economic power for greater access to and control over the government’s decision-making processes.¹⁶⁶ Much of the government’s decision-making processes—from budget-making to regulatory reform—lack transparency or require almost expert-level knowledge to navigate fully.¹⁶⁷ Lobbyists working on behalf of corporations and wealthy interests know when and how to influence the decision-making process.¹⁶⁸ Black and brown communities and those representing their interests often lack clarity on what and how government decisions are being made and are visibly absent from policymaking tables.¹⁶⁹

What This Means For Our Families, Communities, And Our Nation

The outsized role of money in politics incentivizes elected leaders and other policymakers to represent the interests of corporations and the super-wealthy instead of everyday people. Black and brown communities are not granted sufficient power to elect leaders who represent their values and to shape policy decisions that impact their quality of life. Money also acts as a gatekeeper for those who can run for office, locking out people who have historically been denied access to wealth-building channels. All of this contributes to a dramatically unreflective elected representation in the U.S. that fuels deep distrust in government and skews policy outcomes to reinforce economic and political marginalization rather than combating it as a responsive government should.¹⁷⁰



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