



Why We Must Talk about the For the People Act in Race-Forward Ways

American democracy was designed to enshrine the power of white men, at the expense of all others. In particular, it was designed to keep Black and brown people from building formal governing power through the political system. While Black and brown people have been fighting those exclusions and building power in spite of them for centuries, we see the legacy of that exclusionary design to this day. Whether it's the hundreds of voter suppression laws introduced in state legislatures after historic turnout by Black and brown communities, or economic policy that systematically exploits and excludes Black and brown workers and families, or a criminal legal system that does not value Black lives—all of the problems we face today are a result of our democracy that does not reflect the rich diversity of our nation.

Moving forward requires us to be race-forward—both in word *and* in deed—as a country. That means employing race-forward language and strategies. At the federal level, that means rallying behind racial justice legislation, like the For the People Act, that addresses the longstanding racist exclusions in our democracy with policy solutions that are proven to advance racial equity.

Those who say we're injecting race into the conversation fail to acknowledge the ways in which race already is—and always has been—a part of the conversation. Opponents of the For the People Act are talking about their opposition in race-laden ways, even if it's subtle; their racist dog whistles are bringing race into the conversation with their bases. So when we talk about democracy reform in race-neutral terms, we're playing on their turf. We want to play on *our* turf by talking about the For the People Act in race-forward ways.

How to Talk about the For the People Act in Race-Forward Ways

- The For the People Act (H.R.1 / S.1) is a transformative package that will move us closer to a more inclusive, multiracial democracy.
- No single fix can transform our damaged democracy on its own. The strength of H.R.1 is that it pulls together key policies into a bold package that empowers Black and brown communities by fighting the voter suppression, big-money dominance, and skewed representation that silence all of our voices.
- The problems that plague our democracy reflect our long-standing, unresolved problems when it comes to race. And since those problems are rooted in racism and white supremacy, the solutions must be rooted in racial equity.



- Officially, American democracy was designed of, for, and by the people. But the fine print has always made it clear that “people” meant white men with money. Since this country’s inception, Black and brown people have had to fight to build power in spite of barriers at every turn.
- Voter registration was invented in large part to keep Black people from voting, gerrymandering has silenced the voices of people of color ever since they have been able to vote, and big-money politics translates centuries of economic exploitation and exclusion into inequality in our democracy.
- The game is rigged, but Black and brown people have led the way in making the rules fairer for everyone: from the Reconstruction Amendments, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, to the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and the reauthorization of the VRA in 2006, among other wins.
- The For the People Act is the next step in that process of building a multiracial, inclusive democracy. The For the People Act brings bold reforms together into a transformative package. These policies are already working to advance racial equity in the states—in some cases, for decades. It’s time we bring these proven reforms to our entire country.
- The following highlights just a few provisions within the For the People Act that would advance racial equity, with data and messaging to explain how and why.

Voter Registration Modernization:

- First, the For the People Act brings our voter registration system into the 21st century and eliminates registration as barrier to voting. By requiring Online Voter Registration (OVR), Automatic Voter Registration (AVR), and Same Day Registration (SDR) for federal elections nationwide, the For the People Act will take some of bureaucracy out of democracy.
- People in power long have weaponized arcane registration requirements to prevent communities of color from voting. In fact, those requirements were designed, in part, to keep Black people, working people, and immigrants (at a time when non-citizen immigrants could vote) from voting.
- The result is a clear disparity in registration rates by race and ethnicity. While 71 percent of the white, non-Latinx voting eligible population is registered, only 64 percent of the Black voting eligible population, 54 percent of the Latinx voting eligible population, and 53 percent of the Asian American voting eligible populations are registered to vote.



- We know that when Black and Brown people can vote, they do vote. But because registration is, and has always been, a tool of racist voter suppression, far too many Black and Brown people cannot vote.
- OVR, AVR, and SDR can help eliminate those disparities and ensure registration never again stands between Black and brown Americans and the ballot box.

Voting Rights Restoration:

- Just like Ban the Box laws knocked down barriers to employment for Americans with a criminal record, the For the People Act will knock down barriers to voting for people convicted of a felony upon their release from prison.
- Simply put, if you've been released, your voting rights are restored. Full stop.
- Felony disenfranchisement laws—designed to prevent overpoliced Black people from exercising power by voting—have racist roots and yield racist results.
- The Sentencing Project estimates that 6.2 percent of voting-eligible African Americans can't vote because of felony disenfranchisement laws, compared to only 2.3 percent of all Americans. Despite the fact that Black people make up just 13 percent of the population, 35 percent of people these laws affect are Black.
- Their data also show us that an estimated 1.7 million Black and Latinx people would be re-enfranchised through the voting rights restoration provision in the For the People Act, including hundreds of thousands in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and elsewhere.

Small Donor Public Financing for Elections:

- The For the People Act creates a small donor matching system for federal elections that would give small donors like you and me big power.
- Right now, a tiny group of major donors has a great deal of power in politics. And pretty much everyone in that group has 3 things in common: They're rich. They're white. And they're male. In fact, more than 90 percent of contributions come from white donors.
- The lack of diversity on the surface translates into a lack of diversity on the substance. Our priorities—like a higher minimum wage, child care, and universal health care—are not, never have been, and never will be their priorities. Yet with the millions upon



millions these donors spend on politics, they're able to skew government policy to serve their wishes rather than our needs.

- This big-money system doesn't just dictate how elected officials vote. It determines who gets elected to begin with. Without the cash to finance a campaign, qualified candidates of color are kept off the ballot and out of office. It's known as the "wealth primary," and it doesn't go well for most Black and brown candidates who don't know as many rich donors as their white opponents.
 - We can curb the power of big money with small donor public financing, another centerpiece of the For the People Act. A small donor democracy empowers Black and brown communities and others to challenge the status quo and balance out the power of these mostly white, monied interests. Small donor public financing for elections creates a donor pool that better reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of a place, makes it possible for more candidates of color to run and win, and ultimately makes elected officials more accountable to a broad, multiracial base of constituents.
 - We can build a democracy where the strength of our voices doesn't depend upon the size of our wallets, and voters—rather than the wealthy, white donor class—are at the center.
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- The For the People Act includes several other provisions that would play a role in ending the racist structural exclusions that have characterized our democracy forever. These provisions range from making voting by mail more accessible and promoting fair redistricting, to nullifying discriminatory photo ID laws and preventing discriminatory voter purges.
 - In a democracy, we believe in strength in numbers, one-person, one-vote—but in the U.S., Black and brown communities have never had power that comes close to their numbers. Just look at the U.S. Senate, where there are only 10 members of color compared to people of color making up 40 percent of the population.
 - The bottom line is in the name: In a country where far too many have been disenfranchised for far too long, the For the People Act is for the people. This is about transforming America's democracy from a system of racist exclusion to one of multiracial inclusion and creating more space for Black and brown communities to expand and leverage the power they've been building—in spite of all those exclusions—all along.