

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONGRATULATING COLUMBUS, OHIO, ON WINNING THE SMART CITY CHALLENGE

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I would be remiss if I didn't first say that I am pleased to see in the Presiding Officer's chair a fellow Eagle Scout from Wyoming who is as good to the Scouts as a middle-aged man—close enough—as the Scouts were to him as a young man. So it is an honor to speak on the floor with Senator ENZI being in the Presiding Officer's chair.

This has been a great week for my State, the State of Ohio. Yesterday, I was on this floor joining my colleague from Cincinnati to speak about the Cleveland Cavaliers' historic NBA championship victory. Cleveland had not had a winning sports team—winning meaning a championship team—since I was 12 years old, when Jim Brown ran for the Cleveland Browns. In those days, we expected the Cleveland Indians to win every year. They never did. The Cavaliers didn't even exist in 1964. So this was a particularly exciting week for the Cleveland Cavaliers and for my city of Cleveland.

My wife joined literally a million people on the streets of downtown Cleveland to celebrate yesterday. This is in a county of 1.2 million. So either everybody who lives in the county was there or people from all over Northeast Ohio came to join them.

The second great thing for my State this week is that this afternoon Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx is in the capital, Columbus—one of our other major cities and the largest city in the State—in the Linden neighborhood, on the sort of east-northeast side of town, to announce our city as winner of the Smart City Challenge. Secretary Foxx created this competition to define what it means to be a “smart city” in the 21st century. It was a challenge for our cities to integrate new technologies—from self-driving vehicles to electric vehicles, to smart sensors—into this transportation network.

Just as importantly, Secretary Foxx challenged applicants to think beyond adopting new technology for its own sake. Applicants were encouraged to offer a vision for how that new technology can make a difference for all Americans—from connecting low-income neighborhoods to jobs and opportunity to reducing congestion; to making streets safer for pedestrians, bicyclists, and children to get, certainly, to work, but to get to the doctor or the grocery store; to all things that a modern big-city transportation system could be.

Earlier this year, 78 cities from across the Nation submitted applications. In March, the Department selected from those 78 just 7 finalists to

compete for today's award. The competition was tough. Cities such as Portland, OR, Denver, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Austin were all finalists, joining the city of Columbus. Columbus' win was all the more impressive as a result.

Our city would not have won without, first of all, Mayor Andy Ginther's leadership. The mayor didn't do this alone, although he played such a prominent role. The Central Ohio community united to develop innovative solutions to our city's challenges, and that made all the difference in the world.

So \$40 million in grant funding from DOT will be matched by an additional \$10 million from Vulcan, Inc., and \$90 million of matching funds will come from the community of Columbus. This investment will allow the city to deploy some very impressive technology. Columbus will expand the use of electric vehicles. It will be testing a range of sensors, connected vehicles, and smartphone applications.

At Easton, a major commercial hub, a small fleet of driverless vehicles will link the Easton Transit Center with nearby employers. This will expand horizons for bus riders from lower income neighborhoods, such as Linden, who will be able to more easily travel to jobs not near the busline or the transit center.

I am particularly excited that Columbus will focus on the way the transportation systems affect the city's health. In some neighborhoods, the infant mortality rate is four times the national average. My State, shamefully, is 47th in the Nation in infant mortality and 50th in the Nation in Black infant mortality. It is shameful, and it is for a lot of reasons, one of which is that we have a State government that has never really invested in public health in the way they should.

We can't think about problems like this in a vacuum. It isn't just a health care problem. It is a public works problem, and that includes transportation. The “Smart Columbus” plan will measure missed prenatal and pediatric visits so we can align our transportation system with the goal of reducing infant mortality by 40 percent and cutting in half the racial health disparity.

I would add that Mayor Ginther, as council president prior to his job as mayor this year, led the charge citywide on reducing infant mortality. The Greater Columbus Infant Mortality Task Force's Celebrate One Program has made impressive progress in building a coalition and setting aggressive goals to tackle this issue. These new transit options will build on this work.

This is what becoming a smart city should be about—expanding how we think about infrastructure and public works, harnessing technology to ensure a transportation system that benefits everyone, making it a truly public work.

Today's award wouldn't have happened without a very long list of re-

gional partners. I can't name them all, but the Ohio State University, the Columbus Partnership, Columbus 2020, Battelle, Nationwide, Honda, American Electric Power, and many, many more came together to build the application, and they will be working side by side with the city to roll out this vision.

I want to thank Secretary Foxx and Administrator Flowers, with whom I spent part of an afternoon just a couple of weeks ago in Columbus as she was announcing something else we were doing along the CMAX corridor, along the east-northeast Cleveland Avenue part of Columbus.

Our Nation's transportation system is undergoing radical transformation. A decade from now, my children, who live in Columbus, and my grandchildren, who live in Columbus, will travel in different ways than we do today. The Secretary's vision for this program was bold, and I am so excited for cities—for Columbus, specifically, but I also know that other cities will see what the smart city of Columbus has done with this grant, with this new technology in transportation, and they will work with Columbus, mimic Columbus, and turn it into a success for our whole Nation.

VOTING RIGHTS ACT

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, nothing is more fundamental for a democracy than the right to vote. Last year, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, one of the most important pieces of legislation we passed in the 20th century. It opened the door to millions—literally millions—of Americans to exercise their constitutional right.

This year will mark the first Presidential election in half a century without the full protections guaranteed by the Voting Rights Act. Three years ago this week, the Supreme Court gutted a key part of the law, taking the teeth out of provisions that protect voters from suppression laws, with its decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*.

Since that misguided decision, States across the country have passed new voting restrictions that would disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of Americans. Unfortunately, Ohio is ground zero in these efforts to restrict voting rights. These laws, passed by an ultraconservative State legislature in Columbus, include cutting early voting and eliminating Golden Week—created by a more moderate Republican legislature of a decade earlier—when voters can register and vote on the same day. In other words, early voting starts a week before registration closes, so during that week a new voter can register and vote in the same trip to the board of elections.

This May, a Federal court did the right thing and struck down that law and reinstated Golden Week and early voting—proving once again that these State legislators went too far. Judge Watson, a George Bush appointee in

the Southern District of Ohio, found the laws limiting early voting and registration would disproportionately impact African Americans.

Think about this: A decade ago, a more moderate Republican legislature created Golden Week and passed pretty open voter registration laws. This very far-right legislature chipped away, rolled back, and weakened these laws. A George Bush appointee to the court—apparently also more of a moderate, open-minded Republican whom we saw 10 years ago in the legislature—reinforced much of what these legislatures had done in the early 2000s.

Earlier this month, another Southern District Judge, Judge Marbley, struck down another one of these restrictions. He ruled that Ohio's rollback of access to absentee and provisional balloting would also disproportionately disenfranchise African-American voters.

In 2008, African-American voters voted early in person at a rate more than 20 times greater than White voters. In many communities, African-American leaders and activists try to encourage church members and people in the community to vote early in person—totally legal. Often, some people plan to vote on election day, and then they either get sick or they have to stay longer at work and they lose that vote. That is why early voting is so important.

We remember the scenes from Cuyahoga County in 2004, when some voters waited as long as 7 hours to vote. I remember standing at Oberlin College, where people had to wait 7 or 8 hours. In Kenyon College, students waited sometimes longer than that—9, 10 hours—to vote. For hourly workers, for college students who work the third shift, for parents who have to drop their children off at school, early voting ensures their vote will be heard. Maybe college students can stand in line a little longer because professors are pretty good if they miss class because they were voting, but a parent who stops at the polling booth at 5:30, after work, needs to vote quickly and pick up their child. If they have to stand in line for an hour and a half, they are maybe not going to likely vote in the end. That is why early voting is so important.

In 2012, 600,000 people voted early. That was 10 percent of the electorate. That is 600,000 voters' voices that might not have been heard if we hadn't had early voting.

Ohio's law may have been struck down, but too many other States have passed harsher laws that we know will keep voters—often voters of color—from the polls. Seventeen States have passed new voting restrictions since the Shelby County decision. It is almost like they were waiting for their Supreme Court—their very conservative, anti-voting rights Supreme Court—to make a move, and then, in their State legislatures, they quickly moved to restrict voting rights.

In Texas, a new photo ID law is under court review. A Federal judge called it

an unconstitutional poll tax that could disenfranchise up to 600,000 mostly Black and Latino voters.

In North Carolina, the legislature and Governor have gone even further with a whole package of restrictions, including ID laws, reductions in early voting, and elimination of same-day-registration voting.

We are the only advanced democracy in the world where there are actually efforts to restrict access to the ballot box. We know who gets hurt the most. It is African Americans, it is seniors, it is young voters, and it is Latinos. These restrictions were made possible primarily because the Shelby County decision undermined and gutted the Voting Rights Act.

There is a solution. Congress can pass the bipartisan Voting Rights Advancement Act today. We have done these with overwhelming votes in the past. Congress almost unanimously reauthorized the Voting Rights Act not that many years ago, but then the court struck it down, as if the court is wiser than an almost unanimous Congress. We could restore the full protections guaranteed by the Voting Rights Act.

In 1981, when signing an extension to the Voting Rights Act, President Reagan called the right to vote “the crown jewel of American liberties.” This remains true today. There are few rights more fundamental to our democracy than the right to vote. We must continue to do everything in our power to defend it.

With elections at every level of government only 5 months away, it is more important than ever that we push to restore the most sacred of rights—the right to have a voice in our democracy.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Will the Senator withhold his suggestion?

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I withdraw my suggestion.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Michigan, and also an Eagle Scout.

Mr. PETERS. I thank the Presiding Officer for that recognition from a fellow Eagle Scout.

AMERICAN INNOVATION AND COMPETITIVENESS ACT

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act, which is a bill that I introduced yesterday with my colleagues Senator GARDNER, Commerce Committee Chairman THUNE, and Ranking Member NELSON.

This bipartisan legislation is the product of a yearlong effort that began with a series of roundtable discussions on ways to improve the American innovation system. We met with a wide range of stakeholders—representatives from the science, education, business, and economic development communities—and listened to their input. We

leveraged their expertise to develop this important legislation that promotes science and research, strengthens innovation and advanced manufacturing, grows our skilled workforce, and enhances American competitiveness around the world.

Specifically, we are maximizing our Federal investment in basic research by reducing regulatory burdens on academic researchers so they can spend more of their time on science and less on paperwork.

We are strengthening our oversight of Federal research and development investments while ensuring that the integrity of the National Science Foundation's widely acclaimed, independent merit review process is fully maintained.

We are also working to promote STEM education by providing resources to improve the participation of women and minorities in STEM fields. Fixing the underrepresentation of these groups is absolutely critical to American competitiveness in the 21st century. Our country is simply not producing enough qualified new graduates in STEM fields to meet workforce needs. In fact, some studies indicate that the United States must graduate 1 million more STEM professionals than are currently projected to fill the growing number of jobs over the next decade.

Women and other minorities represent the largest untapped talent pool to meet the needs of the STEM workforce today. I am proud that the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act provides significant new support for grants and programs to increase the participation of women and other minorities in the underrepresented groups in STEM fields, both in academia and in the workforce.

We also must ensure that the United States continues to lead the world in innovation. Our Federal investment in research and development has led to discoveries that have had profound impacts on our health, safety, and quality of life. From 3D printing to GPS, we have seen that federally funded R&D has resulted in commercially viable technologies and products. Many universities today operate technology transfer offices and business incubators to expedite the transfer of these groundbreaking discoveries to the marketplace.

However, we have seen in recent years that our Nation is facing significant challenges when it comes to moving innovative ideas across the valley of death, which separates promising research from commercialization. The American Innovation and Competitiveness Act will help bridge this valley by authorizing grants for commercialization of federally funded research, broadening the scope of existing commercialization grants, and improving entrepreneurship training for research so that young researchers can be best positioned to get their innovations to the marketplace.