

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.

This legislation also encourages the Federal Government to utilize prize authority and crowdsourcing to spur innovation and public participation in science. These creative approaches will help engage more Americans in the development of the next big thing.

I am proud that the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act also fosters the expansion of the National Science Foundation's Innovation Corps Program, also known as I-Corps. The primary goal of the NSF I-Corps is to foster entrepreneurship that will lead to the commercialization of technology that has been supported by NSF research funding.

The University of Michigan is home to one of seven I-Corps nodes in the Nation and for years has been a shining example of the strength of this program and its ability to translate research into new, innovative startup companies that are improving lives with their products and creating good-paying jobs.

Our bill will expand the I-Corps Program to other Federal agencies, greatly expanding its reach and helping to facilitate the commercialization to a much broader base of federally funded research.

Finally, I am proud of what this legislation will do to support small- and medium-sized manufacturers in Michigan, as well as across the country. The American Innovation and Competitiveness Act provides for more Federal support for regional manufacturing centers, such as Michigan's Manufacturing Technology Center, or MMTC, which has provided support to Michigan businesses since 1991. By increasing the Federal cost share for the Manufacturing Extension Partnership, this bill will allow MMTC to provide training and assistance to more small- and medium-sized manufacturing businesses.

With this legislation, Congress can do its part to support and invest in the U.S. science enterprise. By enacting the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act, we can drive economic growth, increase American productivity, enhance our safety and security as a nation, and secure our competitiveness going forward. We must solidify our position as the country to beat when it comes to innovation and create more good-paying jobs here at home.

It has been an honor for me to work with my friend and colleague Senator GARDNER on this effort. I also thank Chairman THUNE and Ranking Member NELSON once again for their leadership and support throughout this process.

I look forward to the Commerce Committee considering this critical legislation next week, and I hope the full Senate takes up action soon thereafter.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

NOMINATION OF MERRICK GARLAND

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, today marks the 99th day since President Obama nominated Judge Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court—99 days. Yet Republican colleagues continue to refuse to do their constitutional duty and act on the nomination.

Just this week, we received more proof of Judge Garland's qualifications and another sign that Senate Republicans should act now. As we all know, the American Bar Association, a highly respected nonpartisan and nonideological group made up of qualified experts in the legal field, announced that it unanimously gave Judge Garland its highest rating of "well qualified," and we know they have tough standards. After poring through the available records and speaking to colleagues and peers who know Judge Garland best, here are some of the examples of what they said about him in the ABA report: "Garland's integrity is off the scales." He is a "straight shooter" who is "brilliant, exceptional, and phenomenal."

"Garland is the best that there is. He is the finest judge I have ever met. There is no one who is his peer."

"He is very sharp and works hard to find consensus among the panel. He decides the case but does not decide more than is necessary to resolve the case."

"He always is the best prepared because he wants to get it right."

I would say that is pretty good. I would say all those quotes are amazing. In interviews with hundreds of individuals in the legal profession and community who knew Judge Garland, not one person uttered a negative word about him. I wish we could have that. Not one person uttered a negative word about him.

The Senate has a constitutional duty, as we all know, to provide advice and consent on Judge Garland's nomination. Yet Senate Republicans have doubled down on the obstructionism and said we should not do anything before January 20, 2017, when the next President is sworn in. This is completely irresponsible. We have a Court right now that today came to a tied decision because they didn't have a full complement on the Court on a very important issue that could have been resolved.

Just a week ago, Judge Garland gave the graduation speech at J.O. Wilson Elementary School in Northeast Washington, the school where he tutored students for the past 18 years. He told students in the graduation speech: "Dreams don't come true by magic. . . . Go ahead and dream, and go ahead and work hard to make those dreams come true."

Judge Garland has worked hard for over 19 years, and we have seen his dedication to public service throughout his life and his career.

People in Michigan and all across the country work hard and do their jobs every day to put food on the table, support their families, and build a brighter future for their children. They know they couldn't refuse to do a really important part of their job for 99 days in a row and get away with it.

Tonight Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle will play in the annual Congressional Baseball Game. I hope it will not rain. Baseball, a game that runs for nine innings, requires nine players on the field at a time for a complete team. I hope my Republican colleagues who are playing in the game realize that "we need nine" is applicable both on the field and on the Court.

I call on Republican colleagues to do their job and hold hearings and a vote for Judge Merrick Garland. You have the choice of voting yes or voting no, but we have the responsibility to have the vote.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Ohio.

CONGRATULATING COLUMBUS, OHIO, ON WINNING THE SMART CITY CHALLENGE

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I rise to join my colleague from the other side of the aisle, Senator BROWN, who came to the floor earlier to congratulate Mayor Andy Ginther of Columbus, OH, and the people of Columbus, OH, and Central Ohio for a big victory this week. We won the Federal Department of Transportation's Smart City grant competition. This is something we have been working on for months. It is a big deal to us in Central Ohio. It gives us the opportunity to get \$40 million in terms of a grant from the Department of Transportation to be a model city and also in combination with another grant of \$10 million from Vulcan Corporation and \$90 million that has been raised in the private sector—that is a total of about \$140 million to reshape transportation in Central Ohio to create more economic growth for the citizens of Central Ohio and to be a model not just for Ohio but for the rest of the country on how we can use smart transportation to help create economic growth and opportunity.

I want to thank U.S. Secretary of Transportation Foxx for getting this decision exactly right. As I have said to Secretary Foxx about this competition over the past several months, I believe this is the right investment for our tax dollars. I believe Columbus is the right city. I believe we have done all the right things to be the proper recipient for this. I was honored to help set up meetings between Secretary Foxx and Mayor Andy Ginther. Secretary Foxx was always a thoughtful and respectful listener, and ultimately he made the right decision.

It was a tough competition. We had 77 other cities submit applications, and among the finalists were some very impressive cities, very innovative cities—