

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF
DEMOCRACY

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, today I rise to commemorate the International Day of Democracy. Since 2007, September 15 has offered an opportunity each year to reflect on the democratic values that we cherish and to recommit ourselves to promoting them around the world.

The democratic project is especially important at this moment. Although some communities are experiencing greater rights and freedoms than ever before, there is also an alarming trend of democratic backsliding in many corners of the globe.

Countries that were becoming increasingly open and egalitarian are moving back toward authoritarianism under unlawful, oppressive leaders.

Meanwhile, countries that were already unfree are suffering even more disturbing civil and human rights abuses.

If we turn a blind eye to these developments, it will embolden bad actors to continue undermining freedom, peace, and equality. The United States must lead all democracy-loving people in calling out subversions of democratic rights wherever they exist and holding those responsible to account.

One country that requires our urgent attention is China. The Government of China has not adhered to democratic norms for a long time, but we should never allow that failure to normalize ongoing human rights abuses such as the vicious opposition to the Uighurs.

International nongovernmental organizations have documented China's mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, torture, and political indoctrination of these communities for no reason other than their religious and cultural differences.

We must do everything possible to fight for the freedom and equality of the Uighurs to help end this atrocity.

We also need to stand up for the rights of the people of Hong Kong. Beijing's attempt to circumvent Hong Kong's independent legal system with a far-reaching, oppressive national security law is dangerous and in complete disregard of the one-country, two-system principle. I am likewise disturbed that the Hong Kong government inexplicably postponed the September regional elections for another year. The people of Hong Kong deserve to see their democratic aspirations realized and protected. I am pleased that there is bipartisan, strong support in the U.S. Senate and in the House for the people of Hong Kong, and I joined with Senator RUBIO in introducing legislation to make that clear.

China is certainly not the only place where democratic rights are threatened. We need to look closer to home, as well, to countries like Venezuela. In Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro's illegal regime has produced one of the worst humanitarian crises by plundering the country's resources for personal gain and using the distribution of food as a

tool for social control. Maduro has completely ignored the Venezuelan people's call to return to democracy and is using the current global pandemic as an opportunity to consolidate his own power.

In addition to addressing quasi-dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere, we must maintain pressure on the so-called "last dictator" of Europe, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko. While Lukashenko's near three-decade rule has been full of corrupt power grabs and crackdowns and dissent, his behavior surrounding the recent Presidential election demonstrates a new level of lawlessness. Lukashenko refused to certify opposing candidates and then imprisoned them. He claimed victory through clearly fraudulent election results. He restricted the free flow of information by shutting down the internet and targeting journalists. And he oversaw the brutal repression of protesters, including many instances of Belarusian security forces repeatedly torturing detained civilians. Lukashenko knows that the Belarusian people are ready for a new democratic chapter that does not include him. Instead of stepping aside to serve the interests of his country, he has abandoned the rule of law in order to protect his own power.

It is no surprise that Lukashenko has appealed to Vladimir Putin to endorse this tyrannical approach. President Putin is, after all, a veteran when it comes to destabilizing democracies. He has done so not only in his own country of Russia, where he overcomes dissent by changing the constitution to secure his rule and poisoning political opponents, but also in other parts of the world. That includes his continuous attempts to undermine our democracy here in the United States.

President Trump has completely failed to hold Vladimir Putin accountable for abusing his own people's human rights and attacking the United States. Even worse, President Trump appears to have taken a page out of Putin's book, suggesting that if he were not reelected this November, he may not accept the results of that election. It is a sad commentary on the state of our domestic affairs that we have to take such a ludicrous statement seriously. We know that global democracy is in trouble when the leader of the United States is copying undemocratic heads of state instead of condemning them.

These are but a few snapshots of what is happening in many countries around the world. If there is anything that I have learned in my many years of public service, it is that we can never take democracy—and all the freedoms, rights, and opportunities it entails—for granted. My work in the House and the Senate on the Helsinki Commission really embodies that commitment to stand up for human rights. The Helsinki Final Act made it clear that all States in Europe, the former Soviet Union, United States, and Can-

ada embraced not only democratic principles and human rights of good governance but also the principle that we have a right to challenge the compliance with those commitments in any other member state. It is not interfering in their internal matters; it is holding them to the commitments they made in the Helsinki Final Act.

Democracy is fragile. It must be constantly tended to and protected to survive and flourish. Therefore, while we have a responsibility to monitor the status of democracy in other parts of the world, we have a parallel duty to safeguard and tend to our democracy here at home. I cannot remember a more dangerous time for American democracy since the Civil War.

To protect our democracy, we must protect the ability of every individual to exercise her or his right to vote. In the middle of a pandemic, that means expanding the ability to vote by mail so that we do not force people to choose between participating in our democracy or protecting their health.

We need to make sure that State and local election boards get the resources they need to cover the costs of mail-in voting, and we need to defend the strength, integrity, and impartiality of the U.S. Postal Service.

Our President also openly invites foreign powers to interfere in our election, and his encouragement has been effective. The same external factors that we know influenced the elections in 2016 are once again actively planning to interfere in the upcoming election. Regardless of party affiliation, we should all be able to unite in pursuit of a healthy, functioning democracy. That requires us to take action against the foreign actors seeking to spread misinformation and divide Americans for their own benefit.

When we fail to protect democracy in the United States, it has consequences all over the world. After he was confronted about his recent brutal crackdown on protesters, journalists, and opposition members, Belarus President Lukashenko said that the United States "should sort out their own affairs" before attempting to interfere in Belarus. His statements made clear that President Trump and his administration and supporters' undemocratic behavior is eroding our credibility on the global stage as a voice for human rights. Let today, International Day for Democracy, be a reminder for us to stand up in defense of democracy, whether we are talking about China, Venezuela, Belarus, or here in our own backyard. The world is counting on us.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BRAUN). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be allowed to use, during my remarks, two

exhibits of the Federal aid application form.

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

FAFSA

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I am here this morning to talk about a hearing that we had in the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee this morning that affects 20 million families who have to fill this out every year. This is called the FAFSA. Usually, there is an adjective ahead of it. It is called the “dreaded” FAFSA.

There are 400,000 Tennessee families who fill it out every year. If you want to go to college and you need a Pell grant or a student loan, you have to fill this out—108 questions. And then after you fill it out, the way it has been working and still works today, you have to send in the information on 22 of the questions to two different agencies: one to the IRS and one to the Education Department. And then they go through an elaborate process to check to see whether you have made any mistake.

So let's say you are a homeless student or a student in foster care or you are not able to identify your parents or you are living with your grandparents or any of those people have an aversion to filling out 108-question Federal forms or giving their information to the government twice, then you don't go to college. That is what happens.

In Tennessee, we have had a Governor named Bill Haslam in the legislature that said everybody in Tennessee without a degree, that you can have 2 more years of college free, but first you have to fill out this Federal form. They say this is the single biggest impediment to having the opportunity to have those 2 free years of higher education in our State.

So you would think somebody would do something about that, right? Well, somebody has or at least has been trying to. Here is what it could be. This is 33 questions. Almost everybody agrees that this is better than this—the State counselors, the Governors, the teachers, the students, the families. You could fill it out more easily. It keeps many fewer students from walking away from the opportunity to go to college.

So you would ask: Why don't you pass it? Well, Mr. President, that is exactly what Senator MICHAEL BENNET, the Democratic Senator from Colorado, and I said 7 years ago in a hearing before the Senate Education Committee when we had four witnesses and we talked about this. And I said at the end: There seems to be a lot of agreement about this. Why don't the four of you experts—and these are people who work in financial aid who try to help students and who try to help minority students. I mean, this is the kind of stuff we are talking about all over America today. What do we do about

racial justice? What do we do to help low-income students? How do we help people who are especially hurt by a pandemic?

Well, 7 years ago, I said: Would you be willing to write us a letter, each of you, and tell us exactly what to do to eliminate the complexity of this FAFSA? What they said was that most of these questions are unnecessary and that the Federal Government doesn't need to know the answer to these questions to decide whether you are eligible for a Pell grant or eligible for a student loan. That is what they all said. So the four witnesses who had testified looked at each other and said: We don't need to write you separate letters. We will write you one letter because we all agree on what to do. So they did.

Senator BENNET and I introduced legislation called the FAST Act that would reduce this to the size of a postcard. It only had two questions on it. Well, that was too simplified. What we found out, for example, was that the State of Indiana and the State of Tennessee have their student aid, and they rely on some of this information to decide what aid to give in addition to the Federal aid. So we took the questions off this, and then they would have to ask the questions, so we really hadn't solved any problems.

So we kept working. Senator MURRAY, the Democratic leader of our committee, and I worked together on this during these 7 years, and we began to make some progress. The progress we made first was with the Obama administration, and they agreed to what sounded like a simple change. They just administratively allowed you to use your previous year's tax returns rather than your current year's tax returns to fill out the 22 tax questions on this form. You can imagine how hard it would be to use this year's tax returns, so that was a big help.

Then the Trump administration put this 108-questionnaire on an app so you can use your iPhone to fill it out. Now, that would be pretty hard for me, but I have seen a lot of the youngsters in Tennessee in the Sevier County High School, for example, who went right to work. They did a pretty quick job of doing this. That helped a lot.

Then, Senator MURRAY and I, Senator JONES from Alabama and Senator SCOTT from South Carolina—last year we introduced a bill called the FUTURE Act, and the FUTURE Act did two things. It said that for 22 of the questions here, the ones that you have to give to the government twice—you give it to the Education Department and you give it to the IRS, and then they check to see if you made a mistake, and if they do, they slow down your aid. We said: Let's simplify that. Let's just say all you have to do is check a box, and the IRS will answer those 22 questions for you. That is a law now, and it will take a couple of years to implement because, again, we are talking about 20 million families a year. So we saved them that trouble.

Now, guess what else we saved. We saved enough money to permanently fund historically Black colleges. How about that? Filling out all this form didn't save the government money; it cost the government money. So we were able, in one act, to save 20 million families—many of them minority families and most of them low income—the trouble of filling out those 22 questions and permanently fund Black colleges. So now we have legislation, Senator JONES and I and others—and there are many Senators who have been involved in this, in addition to Senator MURRAY. Senator BOOKER has had an interest, and Senator COLLINS, Senator KING, Senator BURR. Again, I mentioned Senator BENNET earlier. You can see Republicans and Democrats all see the wisdom of this, as well as every witness we have ever had who comes before us. So we have a new bill that says: Let's get rid of 53 questions and turn this into this. That is what the hearing was about today.

Now, why wouldn't we do that? Almost everyone says we should. Should we deliberately require 20 million families to answer 53 unnecessary questions that discourage many low-income students from going to college? Should we insist on that? I don't think so.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, this would probably mean that about 400,000 more students would apply for Pell grants. That is what the Pell grant is for. It is to encourage low-income students who want a ticket to the head of the line, a ticket called higher education, a ticket that the college board said increases your earnings by \$1 million over your lifetime if you get a 4-year degree, and this is our effort to help low-income students get that ticket to a better life and a better education and more money.

So why wouldn't we do it and why wouldn't we do it during this pandemic? This has to be the strangest year of college in a century—at least a century. Students are stressed out, families are stressed out, and then we are going to add to the stress by saying: And in addition, your friendly Federal Government, in order for you to get a Pell grant, is going to insist that you answer 53 questions that everybody says are unnecessary for the government to determine whether you are eligible for the loan or for the grant.

And then there is one final reason we should do it. The act that Senator MURRAY and Senator JONES and Senator SCOTT and I introduced and became law last year with President Trump's signature, the one that saved enough money to permanently fund historically Black colleges, that is going to take a couple of years to implement. So if we go ahead and pass the law that turns this into this before the end of this year, we can do both of them at the same time.

I think the American people would feel pretty good about the U.S. Congress that, in the midst of a pandemic, finished its work on such an important piece of legislation.