

ballot,” he said in 1957, “and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.” “Give us the ballot” and all other rights will follow. With the ballot, he argued, voters could end the worst of racial segregation. They could elect good men and good women to government. They could subdue the dangers of the mob and keep democracy alive. But the ballot had to come first. The ballot had to come first.

Dr. King might as well have been speaking to us, because across the United States, in 2022, ballot access is not being expanded; it is being repressed. And our democracy is not safe; it is under attack.

A year ago, a violent mob incited by the President and his Big Lie attacked this very building in order to reverse the results of a free and fair election. Last week, for the first time, the Department of Justice announced sedition charges against a number of the rioters who were here that day.

A year later, at least 19 States have passed 33 laws that make it harder for people to vote, using the Big Lie—the Big Lie, as false as it is—as a justification. Those States together are home to 55 million Americans, and new laws are certainly coming once the State legislatures return to session this year. And the kind of violence—the threats of violence—we saw on January 6 by that insurrectionist mob is now being threatened increasingly against countless election workers across the country.

Just this weekend, the Houston Chronicle reported that “County officials in urban areas across the State [of Texas] say they’ve been forced to reject an unprecedented number of mail ballot applications [thanks to the new Republican voter suppression law.]

And this past Saturday, Donald Trump once again repeated the same conspiracy theories about the 2020 election that have paved the way for voter suppression at the State level.

So, unfortunately, the dangers that face our democracy are alive and well, and the laws that suppress the vote at the State level are being enacted on a partisan basis.

We have seen periods of regression, in terms of voting rights and equality and fairness to people of color. We have seen regression occur. And this seems to be a period of regression in what the legislatures are doing, and fight it we must.

So the Senate must act. We must step in and act. We must do everything to pass voting rights legislation, just as this Chamber has done in the past, just as the Constitution permits us to do. That is why we will vote this week on the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. And if Republicans choose to continue their filibuster of voting rights legislation, we must consider and vote on the rule changes that are appropriate and necessary to restore the Senate and make voting legislation possible.

As I have recounted already, these laws are urgently needed. We must not—we cannot—allow another period of that regression, which we have seen throughout American history.

Here is what some of the laws would do—our two laws would do:

They would set basic commonsense standards for all Americans for access to the ballot as well as restore preclearance provisions that were passed by this Chamber for decades on a bipartisan basis. They would establish clear and consistent standards for early voting across the country and make it easier for voters to access absentee ballots. They would protect election workers from unlawful intimidation. We are seeing so much of that now. It is disgraceful—disgraceful. They would end the toxic practice of partisan gerrymandering, and they would take new steps to fight the power of dark money corroding our elections. Senate Democrats repeatedly tried, over the last year, to bring Republicans to the table to debate these issues.

I will remind my colleagues that this is not the old Republican Party. I would remind the American people how dramatically the Republican Party has regressed. The Republican Party used to be one that supported voting rights. Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush worked to renew voting rights bills.

No, sadly, unfortunately, this is Donald Trump’s Republican Party. And it is the one now trying to take away the vote from younger Black and Brown, elderly, minority, and low-income voters.

And yet every time we try to engage our Senate Republican colleagues, they resist it. So we have no choice. We are moving ahead on our own.

Once again, no one denies the path ahead is an uphill struggle. Republicans have been clear, they will entertain no bipartisan compromise on voting rights, but long odds are no excuse for this Chamber to avoid this important issue.

Again, Members of this Chamber were elected to debate and to vote. We are going to vote. We are all going to go on the record. And Republicans will have to choose which side they stand on—protecting democracy or offering their implicit endorsement of Donald Trump’s Big Lie.

For months, Senate Republicans have come up with excuses and subterfuges to avoid doing what they know is the right thing, just like so many others have come up with similar lame excuses and subterfuges in the past. But as history shows, doing the right thing will eventually prevail. Justice will flow like mighty waters, as the Prophet Amos has said.

The direction of voting rights in America is enough to have shaken the faith of even the most optimistic champion of America—of democracy. Sometimes it seems like for each step forward, the country takes two steps

back, but fights like this are not unusual in American history.

The story of our country has been a long, arduous march toward expanding the promise of freedom for all Americans. We find ourselves in such a struggle today.

Dr. King had simple, powerful advice for his followers during moments like this: Keep moving. Keep fighting. The road to justice is often painful and full of setback, but we must keep moving. We must keep moving, he said, against every obstacle and prodigious hilltop and mountain of opposition. Let nothing slow you down. And even after you cross the Red Sea only to find yourself in the desert, just keep moving forward through the wilderness. “And if you will do that with dignity,” he said, “when the history books are written in the future, the historians will have to look back and say, ‘There lived a great people.’”

We will keep fighting in the same spirit to protect our democracy in this day and age. And if we do that, I have faith that one day the history books will likewise look back at this generation of Americans and conclude, “There lived a great people,” too.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LUJÁN). The Senator from Vermont.

CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL SHOOTING

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I applaud the remarks of our distinguished majority leader, and I know it comes from the heart because what he is saying publicly, he has also always said both publicly and privately. And I also join with him in the condemnation of the attack on the synagogue this weekend.

I know, in my State of Vermont, the faith community—the Jewish, Protestant, Catholic—all came together with prayers for the safety of the people in the synagogue. But more than just the safety of what happened then, let us pray, all of us, whatever faith we have, that such attacks do not continue in our country.

We have seen too many attacks against people based on their religion or based on their race or based on their country of origin. That is wrong.

In this country, in this country, especially—I was thinking of this when I led the Senate this morning in the Pledge of Allegiance, and I thought, “[O]ne nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Well, it is a constant battle to make sure that we have liberty and justice for all, and we have to do that.

H.R. 5746

And that leads us to where we are today. We have got to stand up and say people can vote. I remember being here and present when the Voting Rights Act was signed by President Reagan, President George H. W. Bush, and President George Bush. I remember the pleasure on their face, the look of everybody around them, Republicans and Democrats, applauding the President for signing that legislation.

Why did they applaud? Why did Republicans and Democrats applaud? Because we had all voted for it because we all believed in a person's right to vote.

You know, I am the only Democrat ever elected to the U.S. Senate from the State of Vermont, and I remember my first two elections which were quite close. Ninety percent—I would say approximately 90 percent of the election machinery, those who count the ballots and whatnot, were controlled by Republicans.

But I had faith in getting through because I knew two things: One, they could count and, two, they were totally honest.

And I am sure—especially in the vote in my first election, for the vast majority who voted for my opponent, an honorable person, they were happy to have counted the ballots, and the State said where the ballots were. And there was even a recount in my second election, it was so close.

And I remember one of the Republican auditing groups sent out a fundraiser, saying we have to fight the Democratic-controlled election machinery of Vermont. And I reminded them that the "election machinery" was 250 town clerks, 80 to 90 percent of whom were Republicans.

And I say again: They can count, and they are honest.

We are fortunate in our State that we encourage everybody to vote. And I remember when the Senators of the other party and the Judiciary Committee said: Well, you want—you want to change the rules so that Democrats would win.

I said: We want, nationally, the kind of rules we follow in Vermont. And, by the way, in last year's election, we elected a Republican Governor and a Democratic Lieutenant Governor. Why? Because our rules do not favor one party over the other. Our rules favor one thing—the right to vote. And we insist on that in our State of Vermont, but we should insist on that throughout the country.

It should not be a case where somebody can be blocked from voting because the voting booths and the places for them are changed so that some communities would have a harder time or a more difficult time to come there or hours change. No. We should be fighting.

If we want America to be the strong, great Nation that we all claim it is and we all believe it is and we all want it to be, it can only be if we say make sure everybody gets to vote—everybody. I don't care whom they are voting for, make sure everybody can vote.

Because what happens when people are blocked from voting and voting drops off, people lose faith in their government. If we lose faith in our government, we lose faith in our country. And if we lose faith in our country, this wonderful experiment in democracy—as some called it a couple hundred years ago—fails.

We can't have that. We can't have that. So I look back on my 48 years here in the Senate, and I think it is not the title; it is not the chairmanships; it is not the President pro tem; it is not being dean of the Senate that I cherish, it is knowing that I can vote. I can vote. I have voted 17,000 times, more than that now.

Can I go back over all those votes and find some where I might think, "Gee, I should have voted differently," of course, I can, but I voted. I can vote. And I call on my colleagues, vote up or down. I would hope that all of us would do as we have in the past, when I have been in the Senate, when we passed the Voting Rights Act 98 to zero. Republican Presidents were signing the Voting Rights Act. Let's go back to that time.

Vote any way you want in a Presidential election. Vote any way you want in gubernatorial, congressional, in local elections, but in this body, this body, which should be the conscience of the Nation, vote to uphold the right to vote, vote to allow every American the ability to vote.

Don't hide behind procedure. Stand on the floor, have the courage and the honesty to say: I am going to vote to allow people to vote or I am going to vote not to allow people to vote. But stand here and say what you are going to do. The last time, 98 of us stood here and voted. We wanted everybody to vote. Republicans and Democrats, we joined together.

Wouldn't that send a wonderful signal to a fractured nation if we did that today and stood up and said: We are going to vote. We are all going to vote. We are going to vote yes or no, but we are going to let people of our State know how we voted. We are going to let the American people know how we voted and say why we voted.

I would wish we voted as we did before to say to all Americans, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, any part of this country: We want you to vote. We will urge you to vote the way we would like, but we want you to have the ability to vote, even if you are voting for our opponents or for a different point of view.

The most important thing, as Americans, as U.S. Senators, is to say we stand for the right of people to vote—every one of us, every single one of us.

I will have more to say on this matter later.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from Hawaii.

VOTING RIGHTS

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, yesterday, we celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr., Day and honored civil rights leaders who fought against inequality and sacrificed so much to move our country closer towards justice for all. But this year, on a day when we should be coming together to commemorate these civil rights achievements and recommit to the road ahead, we are instead fighting a battle we thought was won decades ago.

In 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "Give Us the Ballot" address, where he said:

The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition.

But here we are in 2022 fighting back against hundreds of bills introduced in States across the Nation clearly intended to make it so much harder for certain people to vote.

Twenty-two States have already enacted 47 new laws that make it more difficult to vote by mail, that make it harder to stay on voting lists, that limit the availability of drop boxes for ballots, that limit the number of polling locations, that impose stricter or newer voter ID requirements, and the list goes on. But one of the most insidious is Georgia's law which allows any person to challenge the rights of an unlimited number of voters to cast their ballots.

If someone decides for whatever reason to challenge another person's right to vote, the voter then has to show up to their election office to defend themselves. Imagine being a single mom working two jobs and unable to afford childcare, and now she has to defend her constitutional right just because someone thought she shouldn't be voting at all.

Volunteers are already being recruited to pose these challenges. This isn't voter protection; this is vigilantism. These laws are clearly intended to target communities of color and make it harder for them to vote, period.

Our country's legacy of racial discrimination in voting is undeniable, and it is undeniable that we are witnessing history repeat itself.

In 1890, the House passed historic legislation that would have increased voting protections, particularly for Black voters, but the Senate failed to take up this legislation, failed to act at a critical time when it had the chance, and the results were devastating for decades to come. The Senate's failure to take up this legislation allowed Jim Crow and the plummeting of voter