



July X, 2020

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Dear Member of Congress:

The death of Congressman John Lewis, a civil rights giant, has had a profound impact on people around the world. Public officials both national and international have offered moving words of praise and admiration in honor of the remarkable life and legacy of Mr. Lewis. There is no greater way to pay tribute to Mr. Lewis than by turning those laudatory words into action. It is in this spirit that The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the \_\_ undersigned organizations write to urge you to honor the life and legacy of the late Representative John Lewis by passing federal legislation to safeguard the fundamental right to vote. Mr. Lewis helped lead the historic 1965 march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama – sustaining a cracked skull at the hands of state troopers – and he spent the next half century at the helm of the nation’s fight for voting rights and equality. Mr. Lewis was a civil rights icon, an American hero, and the conscience of the Congress.

There would be no truer tribute to Representative Lewis than for the Senate to pass the Voting Rights Advancement Act (“VRAA”) and the election provisions of the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (“HEROES”) Act. Enacting these critical legislative measures would protect the integrity of the November election and counter the disenfranchisement of communities of color that the nation has sadly witnessed in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s infamous *Shelby County v. Holder* opinion in 2013. That decision gutted the preclearance provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which required states and jurisdictions with a history of discrimination to obtain federal approval before making changes to their voting laws and elections.

In one of his last public statements – on June 25, 2020, the seventh anniversary of the *Shelby County* decision – Representative Lewis observed: “In our country, the right to vote is precious – almost sacred. Countless people marched and protested for this right. Some gave a little blood, and far too many lost their lives. Around the globe, generations of U.S. officials boasted of this legacy and progress. Today, the world is horrified in watching Americans – especially people of color – once again stand in immovable lines and experience undeniable, targeted, systematic barriers to democracy. The record is clear. A rampant war is being waged against minorities’ voting rights in my home state of Georgia and across the nation.”<sup>1</sup>

In the days since his passing, public officials from across the political spectrum have paid tribute to Representative Lewis, a reflection of the universal respect and admiration he commanded during his life of public service and sacrifice. Senate Majority Leader Mitch

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<sup>1</sup> <https://johnlewis.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-john-lewis-demands-doj-action-anniversary-shelby-v-holder-decision>.

McConnell called John Lewis a “monumental figure” who made “huge personal sacrifices to help our nation move past the sin of racism.”<sup>2</sup> But he said nothing about restoring the Voting Rights Act or taking actions to honor John Lewis. The true measure of people are their deeds, not their words.

If Senate leadership truly wishes to pay tribute to Representative Lewis, they will restore the Voting Rights Act by passing the Voting Rights Advancement Act. This crucial bill would correct the Supreme Court’s shameful *Shelby County v. Holder* ruling, create a new Section 5 coverage formula based on recent evidence of discrimination, and help safeguard the right to vote for communities of color across the nation.

Representative Lewis was a fierce advocate of the Voting Rights Advancement Act, and he held the gavel as the House of Representatives passed it over seven months ago, on December 6, 2019. Representative Lewis often called the right to vote “the most powerful nonviolent tool we have in our democratic society,” and he said the VRAA was necessary because the country was in an “ongoing struggle to redeem the soul of America, and we’re not there yet.”<sup>3</sup>

To honor the legacy of John Lewis, the Senate must promptly conduct hearings on the Voting Rights Advancement Act and build an appropriate evidentiary record to buttress this legislation, and then bring it up for a vote. The House has done its part – conducting extensive hearings last year and amassing significant evidence of ongoing voter discrimination in America – and now it is time for the Senate to follow suit.

In addition, the Senate must honor the memory of John Lewis by passing the election provisions of the HEROES Act. This legislation would provide necessary funding of \$3.6 billion to states for election assistance as well as vital voting rights reforms that were based on Representative Lewis’s Voter Empowerment Act – such as no-excuse absentee ballots, at least 15 days of in-person early voting, and online and same-day voter registration – that are essential to help this nation safeguard the November 2020 election. Once again, the House has done its part – passing the HEROES Act over two months ago – and now the Senate must act.

Congress is poised to pass another COVID-19 relief package in the coming weeks, and the package must include robust election assistance and voting reforms for states so that the November general election does not become a large-scale replication of what we witnessed during the primary process. In too many states during the primary season, long lines, poll closures, poll worker shortages and insufficient training, broken machines, and surges in absentee ballot requests that went unfulfilled left many voters – particularly voters of color – unable to safely exercise their fundamental right to vote. It is simply unacceptable to force voters to choose between their fundamental right to vote and their personal health and safety.

John Lewis’s home state of Georgia was ground zero for democracy dysfunction during this year’s primaries. During the Georgia primary in June, some voters of color had to wait in lines of up to seven

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/us/john-lewis-voting-rights-act.html?partner=bloomberg>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/06/house-passes-voting-rights-package-077112>.

hours in inclement weather in order to cast their ballot as a result of such problems as polling place closures, voters not receiving absentee ballots on time, the need to clean and sanitize voting machines, insufficient numbers of and malfunctioning machines, and inadequate training of poll workers.<sup>4</sup> This is nothing short of modern-day voter suppression. The problems in Georgia were exacerbated by the fact that – after *Shelby County v. Holder* – states with proven records of discriminatory voting practices, like Georgia, no longer had to obtain federal approval before making election changes.

John Lewis was never satisfied with an America that did not keep faith with its promises. He refused to accept a country that did not live up to its highest moral values. And he rejected the idea that America could not be better – particularly toward those so often left behind in our society. His life was a living vigil for what it means to remain a foot soldier in the march for equality. Whether in the area of voting rights or systemic racism, or anywhere in which injustice remains, we honor his legacy by continuing his fight for a democracy that works for all of us.

Sincerely,

LCCHR  
Other Organizations

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/us/politics/georgia-primary-voting-atlanta.html>.