



Democracy Still Needs Us

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Many advocates for a strong, robust democratic process were breathing a cautious sigh of relief after the November 2022 midterm elections. With the myth of election denial still alive and well after the 2020 elections, there were threats of increased voter suppression and challenges to election officials and the vote-counting process. Among voting and civil rights advocates, there was a real fear of violence and interruptions at the polls. Thankfully, there was no widespread disruption. In fact, voter turnout was higher than average for a midterm election, which typically see less turnout than a presidential election.

Entering 2023, the work of voting rights and democracy reform may be pushed to the back burner. Public interest in taking steps to strengthen the democratic process often wanes in an off-cycle election year. But this is not the time to fall asleep at the wheel, especially in a time of heightened awareness about the fragility of the democratic process.

On January 6, 2023, I attended two vigils in Washington, DC marking the 2021 attempted insurrection at the Capitol. Last year's congressional hearings on January 6 revealed with stark evidence just how close we came to losing democracy on January 6, 2021. Civil rights leader Andrea Waters King, the mother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s granddaughter, Yolanda King, spoke at one of the rallies. She made a piercing observation: she noted that her daughter Yolanda, the granddaughter of Dr. King, had fewer voting rights today than when her grandfather was alive. What a startling and striking indictment of how much ground we have lost in the struggle for voting rights. We must not lose sight of critical efforts to pass the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act.

Last December, the US Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the Moore v. Harper case, in which the plaintiffs argue that state legislatures should have independent power over elections, outside even the jurisdiction of state supreme courts. The decision will be handed down in June 2023.

It is only one of several Supreme Court cases that reflect moves by the current Court to curtail an array of civil and constitutional rights.

Lost in the media attention around last week's *Roe v. Wade* anniversary was another Supreme Court case anniversary. January 21 marked the thirteenth anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in the *Citizens United* case. That decision opened the floodgates for wealthy donors, special interests, and corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on political candidates and campaigns. Since that decision, which granted corporations more rights than voters, billions of dollars in dark money spending have flooded election campaigns. It is estimated that 16.7 billion dollars were spent on the 2022 elections.

When we consider the critical realities of climate change and gun violence, we must address the role of unlimited campaign spending in outsizeing the voices of everyday voters. Congress has the power to pass

legislation addressing runaway campaign spending through measures such as the DISCLOSE Act, which would enforce greater accountability and transparency in dark money campaign spending.

In his eulogy for civil and voting rights giant, Rep. John Lewis, former President Barack Obama observed, "Democracy doesn't just happen. You have to work at it; you have to tend it." The need to tend our democratic process is as great as ever. We face the prospect of a chaotic, volatile 2024 presidential election year if we do not take steps now to tend democracy.

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