



Troubling the Waters for the Healing of the World

Congressional Advocacy Day - Monday, April 8, 2019

TALKING POINTS – NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

[As you prepare for your Congressional meeting, each person in your group should simply pick out the point(s) s/he feels comfortable with emphasizing. There is no need to cover everything or to be an expert. Speak respectfully in your own words from your faith values, your heart and your experience. Remember: you're there as a constituent and voter!]

As Christians from a broad range of faith traditions, we urge Congress to strengthen the voices of all Americans in our democracy, and the voices of human rights defenders around the world by working to eliminate violent conflict and all threats to civic engagement and human dignity.

Every person has the God-given right to self-determination and full participation in the political community.

- ❖ To protect civil and human rights for all Americans, our nation must eliminate barriers to meaningful political engagement. Implementing vital democratic reforms that are necessary to a fully functioning and healthy democracy will help ensure justice for all and advance the common good.
- ❖ Congress should act to reduce and end violent conflict and strengthen respect for human rights and protection of human rights defenders abroad.

DOMESTIC ASK

We call on Congress to protect civil rights for all and uphold essential democratic principles. To do so, Congress must:

- *Protect civil rights and self-determination of American voters by eliminating all barriers to voter participation,*
- *Implement fair and just election oversight to protect the voice of every voter*
- *Restore the voting rights of returning citizens.*

Speak from your own faith values as they relate to protecting civil rights, and your own experiences facing barriers to voting. Our government is unlikely to implement policies addressing poverty, immigration, creation justice, racial justice, and healthcare, unless all voices are heard and genuine democracy flourishes. The well-being of our country requires the integrity of our democratic process.

- Our faith teaches us to recognize the image of God in every human being and to respect the essential humanity and dignity of each person.
- Every person has the right to full participation in the political community. Yet, the voices of “We the People,” are being suppressed by undemocratic restrictions on voting rights, barriers to voting and the undue influence of unaccountable money.
- Everyday Americans, especially those with lower incomes and people of color, are being deprived of fully exercising their rights as citizens.
- For our democracy to flourish barriers to meaningful political engagement must be eliminated.

[This “ask” largely tracks HR-1 legislation, which the House of Representatives has passed. For meetings with a Democratic House member, thank them for voting for HR-1 and encourage them to keep working to enact its major provisions, which are mirrored below. For meetings with Republican Representatives, all of whom opposed HR-1, urge them to support the voting rights provisions below. Depending on the nature of

the conversation, you might want to ask them why they don't support HR-1. Democrats in the Senate may introduce a version of HR-1, a Senate "For the People Act." Whether or not this happens, or is allowed to be voted on, urge Senators to support the provisions below, whatever the legislative vehicle].

Legislation protecting voting rights is crucial because of policies in recent years that have had the effect of discouraging voting and suppressing voter rights. Many people living in low-income neighborhoods, people of color, people with disabilities and the elderly face unnecessary and punitive barriers to voting.

- In many low-income neighborhoods polling locations have been closed, forcing residents – often without a car – to make their way long distances to exercise the right to vote. Where they do exist, polling locations in poor areas are being deprived of adequate resources thus ensuring long lines and waits to vote that often conflict with work schedules. Many find it almost impossible because of work schedules to get to the polls on voting day, where early voting and absentee voting are severely restricted.
- Unreasonable voter ID laws sometimes combined with the closing of DMV locations in low-income areas penalize citizens who don't have drivers' licenses.
- Restricted voter registration measures unnecessarily disenfranchise too many citizens.
- State and county purges of voter rolls have been determined to unfairly impact minority voters.
- The campaign finance structure undemocratically undermines the "one person, one vote" principle and gives the wealthy more influence in elections.
- Finally, the Supreme Court's decision to limit the Voting Rights Act has allowed states to enact rules that disproportionately disenfranchise minority voters without federal scrutiny.

All of these voter suppression measures make it much harder for people to vote for public officials who will protect their rights by supporting anti-poverty, anti-hunger policies and non-discrimination policies.

I. Urge Congress to protect civil and democratic rights of all voters by eliminating all barriers to voter participation:

1. Congress should strengthen and modernize voter registration by expanding automatic voter registration and online registration.
 - Access to voting should be easier, not harder. Right now significant barriers exist for voters as a result of complicated registration processes, arbitrary voter registration purges, and archaic recounting processes.
 - Ensuring everyone has access to voter registration could address these barriers. Simple and effective measures such as *same day or automatic voter registration* as well as *online voter registration* will increase participation.
 - A thriving democracy is one in which all citizens are freely able to vote, simplifying and modernizing voter registration helps ensure that democracy.
2. Congress should ensure polling places are easily accessible to everyone, including persons with physical limitations, chronic illness or disability.
 - Of 178 polling places in 2016, 60% had one or more obstacles for people with disabilities.* That is simply unacceptable. Polling places should be accessible by public transportation and fully accessible for all individuals.
3. Congress should make Election Day a National Holiday and enact early and extended voting accessible to every state to ensure all voters have the opportunity to participate in elections.
 - Voter turnout in 2016 was just at 60% and in 2018 at 49%. Designating Election Day as a National Holiday would demonstrate a commitment to voting and illustrate the importance of democracy. It would also ease access to voting for many Americans.
 - Every state should offer early in-person voting at a minimum of two weeks before Election Day, including weekend and evening hours.
 - Early and extended voting eases congestion on Election Day, allowing for shorter lines and improved poll worker performance.
4. Congress should reform our current campaign finance structure to end the dominance and influence of corporate money in our politics.
 - For far too long our current campaign finance structure has prioritized private and corporate interests over individual Americans.

- We must reaffirm Congress' authority to regulate money in politics and protect the voices of individual American voters.
5. Congress should restore the protections of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA).
 - The VRA was created to ensure every American has the equal right to vote. Since *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), key provisions of the Voting Rights Act have been rolled back, making the voting process more difficult for marginalized groups, especially women and communities of color. Due to the increasing obstacles and barriers present in our election process, we urge Congress to restore the Voting Rights Act and protect equal rights for all.
- II. ***Urge Congress to implement fair and just election oversight to protect the voice of every voter.***
1. Congress should implement fair redistricting and end partisan gerrymandering.
 - Efforts by politicians to draw unfair election maps only serves those in power, while silencing the interests of the voter. Clear rules and regulations should be implemented to ensure all state redistricting processes are just and fair.
 2. Congress should create a national strategy to improve election vendor oversight to support security of voting systems.
- III. ***Urge Congress to restore the voting rights of returning citizens.***
1. Congress should restore the voting rights of returning citizens to engage in the election process.
 - 6.1 million people have been disenfranchised due to felony convictions, including one in 13 black adults.
 - The U.S. remains one of the world's strictest nations when denying the right to vote to citizens convicted of crimes.
 - Individuals who have completed their sentences in the twelve states that disenfranchise people post sentence make up over 50 percent of the entire disenfranchised population, totaling almost 3.1 million people.
 2. Congress should prevent any measure to keep returning citizens disenfranchised.
 - In 2018, Florida voters passed Amendment Four to the state constitution, which guaranteed restoration of voting rights for nearly all felons upon "completion of all terms of sentence including parole or probation.
 - In 2019, the Florida legislature has proposed a bill that would severely limit the implementation of the passed amendment by requiring former felons to pay any court costs, fines or fees before their sentence can be considered "complete" and their rights restored. The implementation of such a requirement would be a modern day poll tax that would significantly affect low income individuals and individuals of color, ultimately preventing them from having their voting rights restored.

INTERNATIONAL ASK

Our nation's foreign policy should be morally grounded and seek to create a more peaceful and just world where the rights of people around the globe are respected and protected. Yet too often, the values of human dignity, just peace, violence prevention and respect for human rights seem to play an all-too minor role in the crafting of U.S. foreign policy.

We call on Congress to adopt two important new tools to address violent conflict and support human rights worldwide. Congress should act to reduce and end violent conflict and strengthen respect for human rights and protection of human rights defenders abroad by supporting both the ***Global Fragility Act*** and ***S. Res. 80*** creating a Senate Human Rights Commission.

- ***The Global Fragility Act*** sponsored by Senators Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Chris Coons (D-DE) S. 727 and Representatives Michael McCaul (R-TX) and Eliot Engel (D-NY) H.R.1580, requires the U.S. government in collaboration with global civil society to develop a 10-year strategy to bring down current levels of global violence which undermines rights and human dignity abroad.
- ***S. Res. 80***, sponsored by Senators Chris Coon (D-DE) and Thom Tillis (R-NC), would establish a Human Rights Commission in the Senate. This will create a forum to complement a similar existing

commission in the House of Representatives and make human rights issues and the protection of human rights defenders around the globe a more central part of our national debate and policymaking.

I. Why do we need the Global Fragility Act?

1. According to the World Bank, violence and violent conflict are now the leading causes of displacement worldwide, driving 80% of humanitarian needs.
2. United States foreign policy and assistance efforts in highly violent and fragile states too often prioritize responding to immediate needs rather than solving the problems that cause them, or tend to escalate the violence in the area.
3. The Global Fragility Act (GFA) would advance the values of human dignity, just peace, conflict transformation, solidarity, participatory processes, and nonviolent peacemaking, while helping the U.S. government do a better job of addressing the root causes of violent conflict.
4. The GFA would launch the first-ever whole-of-government strategy to address the risks of fragility by stabilizing conflict-affected areas and preventing violent conflict globally;
 - Identify where fragility poses the greatest threats to civilian security and select those countries or regions where the U.S. government will pilot innovative diplomatic and programmatic action;
 - Improve its ability to measure, evaluate, and assess efforts to prevent violence and fragility;
 - Report to the Congress and the American people on a biennial basis on which tools are most effective for stabilizing and preventing conflict;
 - Authorize existing funds.
5. An earlier version, the Global Fragility and Violence Reduction Act, passed the House in 2018 and would have passed the Senate at the end of the session if not for a hold placed on the vote.

II. Why do we need S. Res. 80 creating a Human Rights Commission in the Senate?

1. A Senate Human Rights Commission is urgently needed given the tremendous dangers faced by human rights defenders worldwide. At least 321 defenders were killed in 2018 within just 27 countries. Thousands of human rights defenders face threats, physical attacks, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearances, and assassinations.
2. Around the globe governments are enacting restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, press, and association; are enacting or enforcing laws restricting the funding and registration of civil society organizations; are using anti-terrorism and other laws to restrict the rights of defenders and journalists; are using deadly force to repress peaceful protesters; and are failing to protect defenders and to investigate and prosecute the crimes against them.
3. Like the existing Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the House side, a Senate Human Rights Commission:
 - Could become a vital bipartisan forum in which members of Congress can hear from human rights activists and human rights experts and call for action from governments around the globe to protect human rights and end human rights abuses.
 - In the last year, for example, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the House held hearings on how to prevent mass atrocities, the refugee crisis in Eritrea, peace and victims' rights in Colombia, and victims' rights in Burma.
 - Foreign Affairs and Foreign Relations Committees debate important issues of foreign policy, but there must be one place in the Senate and in the House where human rights are first and foremost. In the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, for example, issues of national security and the confirmation of ambassadors take up much of the time for discussion.
4. The House of Representatives has benefitted from the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission since it was established in 2008. A predecessor, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, existed since 1983. It is high time the Senate established its own Human Rights Commission.
5. Cost: The bill permits salary and expenses of Commission staff to a total of \$200,000 per year—hardly a large sum for the Senate to elevate debate on human rights.

NOTE: If the congressperson has co-sponsored either one, ask them to speak out and mobilize their peers to support the legislation. If they have not co-sponsored, then ask them to do so and vote for the legislation.