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Letter to the Public

To my fellow citizens:

When comparing the America of today, with the America of 1963, at which time Dr. King wrote his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, it is incredible to see the amount of progress that has been made. In recent years, we have elected our first black president, the right to marriage has been extended to members of the LGBT community, and the first Hispanic woman in history was confirmed to serve on the Supreme Court. However, progress is not permanent. Nowhere is this sentiment more evident than with regard to voting rights.

One of the crowning achievements of the civil rights movement was the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Unfortunately, in recent years, there has been a renewed assault on the right to vote for our most vulnerable citizens. Most notably, in 2013, the Supreme Court in [Shelby County v Holder](#) overturned a key provision of the voting rights act of 1965, which required certain states with a history of discrimination in voting to seek preclearance from the federal government before they could make changes to their existing voting laws.

Even before the Shelby decision, states had already begun to implement increasingly stringent voter restrictions. This trend has only grown in recent years. For example, there are now [32 states](#) that have enacted some form of voter ID laws. The most common justification for such laws is to eliminate voter fraud. However, this refrain rings hollow when one considers the evidence at hand. Studies have consistently proven that there have been a statistically insignificant number of [voter fraud cases](#) in recent years. The more plausible reason such legislation has been enacted is to make it more difficult for certain voters to cast their ballots. Voter ID laws have been proven to have disproportionate impacts on minority communities, low income citizens, students, and the elderly; which often are less likely to have access to the types of government issued IDs that so many states now require in order to vote.

In addition to voter ID laws, another pervasive rollback that has been occurring at an alarming rate is the lessening numbers of [early voting](#) sites. This is unfortunate for many reasons. One justification for early voting is that it offers more opportunities for working people to vote. Another important motive for early voting is to drastically shorten long voter lines, which have so often served as a deterrent to voter turnout. Additionally, the evidence suggests that attempts to decrease access to early voting have had a disproportionate effect on blacks and Hispanics when compared with whites. Based on America’s long documented problems in race relations, these concerns merit heightened attention.

All this begs the question, besides rolling back voter ID laws and increasing access to early voting, what else can be done to improve access to the polls? By far, the most powerful action that would expand voting rights to millions of Americans would be eliminating legislation that denies people with a felony conviction from voting. No group of citizens are more vulnerable than those who have been disenfranchised. This disenfranchisement is all the more concerning when one considers the enormous disparity in arrest rates for members of minority communities. For example, in the state of Florida, more than [one in five African-Americans](#) cannot vote due to laws that place a lifetime ban on anyone with a prior felony conviction. Considering blacks and Hispanics are arrested at [far higher rates](#) than whites for identical crimes, this discrepancy is all the more unjust. Such laws are anathema to the ideals of Dr. King who fought his entire life to ensure equal access at the polls for all citizens, especially the most vulnerable amongst us.

As I end this letter, I must reflect on what I see as our greatest remaining obstacle, the indifference of our fellow man. In Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", he speaks of his belief that the greatest obstacle to racial equality was not "the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klan member, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to order than to justice." No matter our race, religion, ethnicity, or gender, when we affirm our commitment to equal access at the voting booth for all of our fellow citizens, the indifference that Dr. King spoke of over fifty years ago will recede further and progression towards true equality for all will become ever closer.

Sincerely,

Matthew Glass