Using Our Voice:

How is voting in America unequal and insufficient in recognizing all the voices in our democracy?

I was raised believing that democratic elections with equal access to voting and representation matters. As a Latina, and daughter of immigrants, voting was always something my family had a lot of pride in. It meant we had a say. It meant we felt like Americans, who had always been famous for their democracy and “equality”. And through this upbringing, having the freedom to use my voice and working together with others whose voices are suppressed is personal to me.

My dad was born in Honduras during the 70s, a time when voices were suppressed, and a time of military rule and human right abuses. He grew up in Nicaragua where his family faced the horrors of the Somoza dictatorship and the violence of the Sandinista revolution. My mom was born in Mexico during a time of corruption and impunity, where not all voices were heard, and where a single ruling party faked democratic elections and would re-elect itself, year after year -and it did so for 70 years. My parents not only survived times of voice suppression, violence, corruption and impunity, but meeting as teens in Mexico City, they also engaged in civil and political marches and movements to raise their voices to end the ruling of a single party and support a transition to democracy. They signed petitions, engaged in political campaigns, worked on electoral booths and participated in public debates. Their history and stories inspire me everyday and only made my commitment to democratic values even stronger.

Born in the US and growing up under Barack Obama’s presidency, I thought that in our democracy all voices were heard, and that everyone had equal access to voting. I thought representation, and mostly, that our democratic government was here to stay. But two major events burst my bubble and changed my thinking: the 2020 pandemic and the 2021 assault on the U.S. capitol. These events showed me that at the local and national level, not all voices are fully represented, and that our democracy is actually very fragile.

At the national level, the COVID pandemic hit most hardly members of the Black, Native American and Latino communities highlighting the effects of poverty and unequal access to health care, insurance, food security, and housing in America.[1] At the local level, COVID affected the Latino community in New Jersey immensely: 40% of COVID-19 victims under 50 years were Latino men, even though Latino men make-up only 12% of NJ population under 50. [2]

Disproportionate COVID deaths in black and brown communities, pointed to the urgent need to have all voices represented in government in order to protect rights and address needs related to health and well-being. For example, uninsured immigrant Latino families were left behind from federal relief and COVID aid and this prompted major non-profits like *Make the Road New Jersey* to start a voting engagement program in NJ.[3] Voting would give Latinos a voice and would elevate their concerns such as access to government aid and relief in a time of crisis.

While voting would voice the needs and concerns of those left behind during the pandemic, I soon saw with my own eyes that **not everyone in America has equal access to voting**. Just like COVID deaths, practices that discourage or prevent voting are most prevalent in underrepresented ethnic, racial, disabled and linguistic communities. If access to voting is unequal, then all voices will not be fully represented in government and public policy will not address everyone's needs.

Frequent changes to polling site locations and a reduction in the number of polling places affect mostly communities where people of color live and vote. Latinos, for example, are less likely than other Americans to have reliable, high-speed internet access which prevents some from obtaining customized and updated polling location information.[4] To add to the hurdle, constantly moving residences puts Latinos are at a higher risk of not receiving voting information and mailing ballots at the correct location. Latinos are overrepresented as renters and are more likely to move addresses.[5] This makes it more likely to be registered to vote at an outdated address and not be eligible to vote.

Language barriers also make it extremely difficult for non-English speakers to use their voice through voting. According to the NALEO Educational Fund, there are more than 6 million eligible Latino voters in the US who are not fully fluent in English.[6] In some states, voting information is not available in multiple languages, English only absentee ballots are the only ones available, and there are no bilingual poll workers present at the voting locations. With language barriers prevailing, it is not surprising that Latinos vote at a lower rate that other ethnic groups.[7]

Voting suppression laws have a long history and create voting barriers for underrepresented communities of color. Since 2020, nineteen states have enacted new **voting laws that prevent or discourage voting** by shortening early voting periods, adding new requirements to vote-by-mail ballots, and adopting stricter or discriminatory voter IDs.[8] Even before the most recent voting suppression laws were enacted, Black and brown communities were at a disadvantage in terms of access to voting. In 2016 Blacks and Latinos were twice as likely as Whites to have trouble getting off work to vote. In addition, more Blacks and Hispanics than Whites reported missing the voting registration deadline. Black and Latinos also reported that they (or someone in their household) were told that they lack the proper identification to vote.[9]

Recent voting suppression laws worsened voting access for Black and brown communities. In Georgia, for example, Bill SB202 was signed into law reducing the number of statewide

polling places by 10 percent, reducing the number of ballot boxes in communities of color, reducing voting hours, and adding voter ID requirements. Bill SB202 also made it illegal to provide those waiting in line with food or water.[10] Research shows racial disparities in waiting times.[11] Voters in low-income communities of color wait in longer lines than those in wealthier and white communities.[12]

Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing electoral districts to favor one political party or to reduce the political power of a particular group of voters.[13] Gerrymandering has historically hurt communities of color, making races less competitive and unfair.[14] The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) protected voters against racial gerrymandering as it required states to get their voting processes, including drawing districts, approved by the Department of Justice. In 2013, the Supreme Court decision *Shelby County v. Holder* took away federal supervision and states were able to draw their own districts without the approval of the Department of Justice.

Earlier this year, the Washington Post reported that redistricting in 28 states resulted in more majority-White districts added than any other demographic majority. In addition, while the Black population increased, the number of majority-Black districts fell by half.[15] Gerrymandering suppresses the voice of Blacks and Latinos the most in Southern states. For example, Blacks account for about one-third of the population in Georgia, Alabama and Louisiana, but their political power is diminished because of the way the congressional districts are drawn. Texas earned two new congressional districts as a result of population growth during the last 10 years. Latinos accounted for half of the population growth in Texas, but the newly drawn districts were majority-White and not Latino.

Voter intimidation is behavior that is intended to provoke fear in voters, making them vote against their preferences, or not vote at all. Examples include spreading false information about voter fraud, voting requirements, and harassing voters by questioning them about their qualifications to vote.[16] At the start of his presidential campaign, Donald Trump made xenophobic arguments against Latinos calling them rapists and undocumented criminals. During his reelection campaign in 2020 President Trump spread the false claim that millions of noncitizens would vote illegally.[17] Unfortunately, the false perception that the election was stolen by illegal voting spread among his supporters. Most recently, for example, on November 1, 2022, a federal judge issued a restraining order against an Arizona group called C*lean Elections USA* that believed the 2020 Presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump and was trying to intimidate voters using “vigilante” practices to monitor drop boxes. The lawsuit against C*lean Elections USA* was brought by *Voto Latino*, an organization that advocates for Latino civic rights and voter engagement.

Misinformation about the electoral results in 2020 led to a violent and anti-democratic insurrection on January 6, 2021 at the Capitol that killed 5, injured more than one hundred people and threatened our democracy.[18] While the coup failed, the perception that the election was stolen and the lack of trust in the electoral results remains. According to a CNN poll conducted this summer, 36% of Americans do not believe that President Biden legitimately won the election. Among Republicans, that number increases to 78%.[19] The lack of trust in

the electoral results can lead to more voting suppressing measures and more anti-democratic violence which puts our democracy at risk.

If voting is unequal and insufficient in recognizing all voices in our democracy, how can we change this? How can we get involved?

Informed citizens are the best equipped to defend democracy: get informed and spread awareness about voter suppression.

Start with our local community. The best way to fight voter suppression is through education, and outreach efforts to local underrepresented communities, including Black, brown, disabled and non-English speakers.

Work with local communities to provide voter education in safe spaces, like schools, churches and local community centers. Democratic values and democratic decision-making processes can be learned at an early age (e.g., from voting for a sixth-grade student council rep to learning to accept and respect the results of an election). Engage students with a passion for civil justice and put special focus on those that are not fluent in English. We can also create awareness of voting suppression practices and focus on high school juniors and seniors who will be of voting age by the next presidential election.

Technology now allows us to reach beyond our geographic boundaries. We can launch social media campaigns aimed at young Latinos and Blacks, that include voting registration information and deadlines, and polling information. Young folks can help spread the word with their older family members.

For those of us that speak Spanish, work with local non-profits like *Latinos Action Network*, *Unidos US Action Fund*, or *Make the Road New Jersey* that support voting engagement campaigns for Latinos who are not fluent in English. Helping non-English speakers understand how and when to register to vote and where to find poll locations is key for exercising their right to vote. We can also engage local communities and governments to increase the number of polls and increase education for mail-in-voting and provide voting information in multiple languages.

Tell the adults you know to learn about the *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* (JLVRAA), which would fully restore the *Voting Rights Act (VRA)* and ensure renewed oversight by the federal government on states' voting processes, expand early voting and ensure that every voter has equal access to vote.

Get involved and join rallies against gerrymandering and in favor of fair mapping and representation.

Mostly, care. Our democracy cannot be taken for granted, and we all must do our part.

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