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As citizens of the United States of America, our most prized action is exercising the right to vote. To have the privilege of saying “I helped elect that candidate” is a priceless feeling. Voting is how we, as Americans, voice our opinions and use our intellect to engage in democracy. In fact, our country boasts voting as a fundamental piece of a strong democracy. But how truly universal is this cherished activity? It seems almost contradictory to encourage such a cause when it is a futile excursion for some. Barriers to voting access, such as ID laws, polling place changes, and felon disenfranchisement, haunt the explicit rights given to all citizens in the Constitution and risk introducing moral corruption into the American democratic system.

Gaining the right to vote has been the objective of many passionate and determined movements in American history. With the ratification of the 15th amendment granting all men the ability to vote, as well as the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote, it seemed the issue of voter suppression had been resolved. As years progressed and discriminatory policies towards minorities survived, the notion that everyone had equal rights was proved false. Through grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and poll taxes, voters of minority races were effectively blocked from a majority-dominated voting arena. While it seems that these issues were finally solved with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, other forms of voter suppression have emerged over time.

One of the most prevalent barriers to voting access in the United States is Voter-ID laws. Legislation in some states requires eligible voters to present an acceptable form of identification to participate in an election. Currently, thirty-four states have enacted these strict laws, essentially negating the years of progress made towards voting equality for minorities and lower-income groups. For some, it is difficult to obtain identification due to financial hardship or

being incapacitated. The overall cost of applying for an ID can be anywhere from \$75 to \$175, according to Richard Sobel of Harvard Law School. While this may not seem like a hefty fee, for those surviving on close to minimum wage, it could be a large blow to their monthly income. It is more practical for them to purchase food rather than spend their money on travel expenses, document fees, and waiting times to receive a form of identification. In certain rural areas, the closest office to apply for a photo ID is almost 170 miles away (Sobel 2014, 22). With public transportation often being a scarce commodity in such localities, a heavy burden is placed on those applying for a form of identification. Without direct access to mandatory IDs, capable and qualified citizens are prohibited from voicing their opinions, only further adding to the systemic racism and pervasive discrimination in our country.

Commonly seen in many black communities, polling place closures or changes bar large populations from voting in local, state, and national elections. Following the 2013 Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* which eliminated certain provisions set forth in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it became easier to shut down or alter the location of polling places. Decreasing the number of polling places can have a profound impact on voter turnout around the country. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, with fewer polling places, there are longer lines and citizens have to travel further in order to vote. The lengthy wait is too much time away from work for some. Voting officials change the precincts in order to throw the election in their favor, suppressing those of a lower socioeconomic status throughout the United States.

A substantial number of felons have their voting rights restricted after being released from prison. This not only contributes to widespread disenfranchisement, but by neglecting certain citizens, it does not accurately portray the decisions of a district. Around 6.1 million U.S.

felons have been denied voting access, with one in every thirteen African Americans disenfranchised due to their prison sentencing. While some believe that felons may contain weakened judgement by cause of their crimes, impeding the rights of these humans diminishes the idea of universal suffrage and can negatively affect civil participation in communities around the country.

It is essential to regulate these pressing issues to conserve our nation's inherent principles of democracy. To expand voting rights to those who may feel excluded from the American politics, multiple changes could be made. First, increased accessibility to applying for forms of identification would greatly benefit those rejected from polling places as a result of no photo ID. This would mean expanding the number of respective offices for photo ID application, and also providing free resources such as no-cost application fees and stronger public transportation in rural areas. Next, regarding the closure and movement of polling locations, petitions for legislation could be enacted, requiring officials to confirm equally dispersed polling places and set mandates to limit location changes. While it's extremely difficult to push legislation into party agendas simply through advocating, it would still be useful to raise awareness for the issue. Lastly, stripping felons of their intrinsic voting rights is a problem still rampant in states across the U.S. While some governors have taken the preliminary steps in fixing the matter, states such as Kentucky and Iowa still fully ban felons from casting their vote in any political election. Passing legislation to prohibit voter suppression will require extensive campaigning and lobbying on the state and national level.

Voting is how residents of a country express their opinions. It's the driving force that keeps the engine of democracy running and functional. Without it, the United States would be an

elitist oligarchy, essentially confiscating the inherent power given to the people. The absence of barriers to voting signals a country where each and every citizen's voice is truly heard. In order to protect the foundational liberties and keep governmental power in the hands of the citizens, voter suppression must be solved and thus, completely abolished.

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