

# [***As Elections Heat Up, Democracy Needs Our Help | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGP-DWB1-DY68-10SR-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** If we care about our democracy and our way of life, we cannot sit idly by.

**Body**

This past weekend, activists traced the steps of the late civil rights leader and U.S. congressman [*John Lewis*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/john-lewis?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) when he led hundreds from Selma, Ala. to Montgomery, starting at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, to demand the free exercise of the right to vote for all. In 1965, state and local police met them with violence, but [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and the president finally acted, eventually passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, granting all Americans the right to vote.

Nearly six decades later, their journey for justice provides a vital backdrop of President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)'s State of the Union coming up this Thursday. As our democracy continues to face threats, from the [*Supreme Court*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/supreme-court?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) continuing its rewriting of the constitution regularly denying rights instead of expanding them, and the regular undermining of our free and fair elections, the president will address a joint session of Congress with the reality that today, we now have weaker voting rights protections than at any time in the last decade thanks to the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* and *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee.* We continue to see litigation aimed at weakening the Voting Rights Act.

As a civics teacher serving as the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), I've been reflecting on where our country is at this pivotal, Dickensian moment. At Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, N.Y., I taught an AP U.S. Government and ***Politics*** course, regularly covering the values underlying our democracy: that the people are supposed to decide who governs them, not politicians. I taught that in a democracy, under the clear meaning of the U.S. Constitution, everyone eligible gets to vote, their votes are tallied, and win or lose, we respect the outcome. That is the essence of American freedom.

So, it's troubling to see that pluralism crumbling. In 2023, at least [*14 states enacted 17 restrictive voting laws*](https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2023-review), which will be in effect for the 2024 general election. These laws range from putting new restrictions on vote-by-mail, banning or limiting drop boxes, and creating stricter voter ID requirements. Congress has yet to pass meaningful reforms to secure the right to vote and protect the integrity of our elections.

If we care about our democracy and our way of life, we cannot sit idly by. There is a pressing need to pass federal voting rights legislation to ensure all of us have a say in the decisions that impact our lives and communities.

President Biden is doing his part. On March 7, 2021, he issued his [*Executive Order on Promoting Access to Voting*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/03/07/executive-order-on-promoting-access-to-voting/), which is a critical tool in providing nonpartisan election information and registration opportunities to Americans. While this is a step in the right direction, to meet this moment, we need additional bold comprehensive reforms, like those included in the Freedom to Vote Act, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, and the Native American Voting Rights Act.

These efforts would better safeguard American elections, providing essential tools to make them fair and accessible for everyone eligible to vote. They also help break down barriers and expand access to the ballot for voters in tribal communities, altogether helping ensure our government is truly of, by, and for the people.

This upcoming State of the Union provides an opportunity for all of us, from the president to every American that cares about having a voice in how their country is governed, to continue to call on Congress to fulfill its duty, and prioritize comprehensive democracy reform. We cannot have a truly representative democracy unless all of us have a real right to vote, and have those votes counted. That is key to having a voice in the issues affecting our daily lives: from building an economy that works for everyone, to investing in quality public education, to protecting access to health care, protecting our climate, and championing racial, social, and economic justice.

This country was born out of a struggle to create a true representative democracy, and our most celebrated and historic trailblazers lived and died by the principle that every citizen had the right to vote. We teach our children this, and it's time we deliver on that promise.

*Randi Weingarten is president of the 1.7-million member American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and a member of the Democratic National Committee.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2357818/traffic-moves-along-pennsylvania-avenue.jpg)

**Graphic**

Traffic moves along Pennsylvania Avenue

J. David Ake/Getty Images

Traffic moves along Pennsylvania Avenue with the U.S. Capitol building in the background early in the morning on Feb. 6, 2024, in Washington, D.C.

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