



October 23, 2015

**Officers**

**Chair**

Judith L. Lichtman  
National Partnership for  
Women & Families

**Vice Chairs**

Jacqueline Pata  
National Congress of American Indians  
Thomas A. Saenz

Mexican American Legal  
Defense and Educational Fund  
Hillary Shelton

**Treasurer**

Lee A. Saunders  
American Federation of State,  
County & Municipal Employees

**Board of Directors**

Barbara Arnwine  
Lawyers' Committee for  
Civil Rights Under Law

Helena Berger  
American Association of  
People with Disabilities

Cornell William Brooks  
NAACP

Lily Eskelsen Garcia  
National Education Association

Marcia D. Greenberger  
National Women's Law Center

Chad Griffin  
Human Rights Campaign

Linda D. Hallman  
AAUW

Mary Kay Henry  
Service Employees International Union

Sherrilyn Ifill  
NAACP Legal Defense and  
Educational Fund, Inc.

Jo Ann Jenkins  
AARP

Michael B. Keegan  
People for the American Way

Samer E. Khalaf, Esq.  
American-Arab  
Anti-Discrimination Committee

Elisabeth MacNamara  
League of Women Voters of the  
United States

Marc Morial  
National Urban League

Mee Moua  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice |  
AAJC

Janet Murguía  
National Council of La Raza

Debra Ness  
National Partnership for  
Women & Families

Terry O'Neill  
National Organization for Women

Priscilla Ouchida  
Japanese American Citizens League

Rabbi Jonah Pesner  
Religious Action Center  
Of Reform Judaism

Anthony Romero  
American Civil Liberties Union

Shanna Smith  
National Fair Housing Alliance

Richard L. Trumka  
AFL-CIO

Randi Weingarten  
American Federation of Teachers

Dennis Williams  
International Union, UAW

**Policy and Enforcement  
Committee Chair**

Michael Lieberman  
Anti-Defamation League

**President & CEO**

Wade J. Henderson  
**Executive Vice President & COO**  
Karen McGill Lawson

Mark Hoffman

Chairman

CNBC

900 Sylvan Avenue

Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632

cc: Carl Quintanilla, Becky Quick,  
and John Harwood (moderators)

Phil Griffin

President

MSNBC

One MSNBC Plaza

Secaucus, NJ 07094

cc: Rachel Maddow (moderator)

Dear Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Griffin,

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the 40 undersigned organizations, we urge you to engage the candidates on the critical issue of voting rights in the October 28 “Your Money, Your Vote: The Republican Presidential Debate” on CNBC and the November 6 “First in the South Candidates Forum” on MSNBC.

**Specifically, we would like your moderators to ask the candidates:**

- 1. To explain their positions on bipartisan legislation pending in both the U.S. House and Senate to restore and strengthen the Voting Rights Act, and**
- 2. To tell the voters what they would do as president to address voting discrimination.**

Through the previous three nationally televised presidential debates, not one question has been asked about voting rights. And yet, voting rights is already a major issue in the lead up to the 2016 election and could prove instrumental in its outcome.

Since 2010, our nation has seen a wave of new state voting laws, many of them making it more difficult to cast a vote and to have that vote counted. While some states, like California and Oregon, have moved dramatically to expand access to voting, others, like North Carolina and Texas, have increased registration requirements and reduced opportunities to register and to vote. The burden of many of these restrictions falls heaviest on voters of color, language minorities, and voters with disabilities, sparking intense controversy and spawning expensive, time-consuming legal battles – some of which are destined to reach the Supreme Court.

The stakes for voters – and our nation – are extremely high: These laws and lawsuits could have an enormous impact on the election of the next president, the Congress, governors, state legislators, and local races from mayor to school board, making it essential that the candidates for president address the issue of voting rights.

The controversy over voting rights comes as the nation commemorates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act, our nation’s most effective civil rights law. Earlier

this year, President Obama, former President George W. Bush, and more than 100 members of Congress – Republicans and Democrats – joined together in Selma, Alabama, to honor the brave men and women who were beaten as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, in what became known as Bloody Sunday. The violent response to that march galvanized the nation and a bipartisan majority in Congress to pass the VRA five months later.

But for many Americans, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the VRA – which made our democracy more fair, inclusive and accessible – has felt more like a wake than a celebration. Many of the controversial new laws were passed or implemented in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 5-4 *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) ruling that greatly diminished the VRA’s ability to protect voters in places with a recent record of voting discrimination. Because of the *Shelby* ruling, this will be the first presidential election in 50 years conducted without the full strength of the VRA.

Republicans and Democrats have traditionally come together to support and strengthen the VRA. While President Johnson, a Democrat, called for and signed the VRA in 1965, Republicans Richard Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush signed the four VRA reauthorizations during their presidencies. And since the Supreme Court’s ruling, bipartisan legislation has been introduced in both the House (the Voting Rights Amendment Act) and Senate (the Voting Rights Advancement Act) to restore the VRA’s protections.

Few of the presidential candidates have made their positions known on the legislation or said what they would do to protect citizens from voting discrimination. But the issue won’t go away, as demonstrated by the recent closure by Alabama of driver’s license offices in 31 counties – including those with the largest percentage of black voters – making it harder for voters to obtain the most common form of photo ID that Alabama requires be shown at the polls to cast a vote.

Given this and other controversies, every candidate should be asked to justify their position on the VRA legislation in Congress and say what they would do to make sure that no citizen is denied the right to vote.

**As moderators and broadcasters of the next two debates, CNBC and MSNBC have the opportunity and the obligation to get all the presidential candidates on the record regarding their stands on voting rights.**

CNBC’s “Your Money, Your Vote: The Republican Presidential Debate,” will likely devote a significant amount of time to economic issues. When it comes to economic issues facing our nation, voting rights are fundamental. Voting is how citizens express their will and hold their governments accountable. Their votes impact every facet of our nation’s economic policy, including how our taxes are raised or spent, the delivery of health care, the availability of housing, the decisions that shape our transportation systems, the resources available to our schools, our trade and energy policies, and how we address issues such as poverty and the impact of the justice system on families and communities. Voting rights are inseparable from our nation’s economic future and, therefore, perfect for this format.

MSNBC's "First in the South Candidate's Forum" is also an appropriate venue for the candidates to discuss voting rights. The forum will be held in South Carolina and co-hosted by 13 Southern Democratic State Parties, many from states with new voting restrictions that had been covered in full or in part by the Voting Rights Act before the *Shelby* decision. A failure to raise the issue of voting rights with the candidates in a southern-focused forum would be unthinkable.

Voting is the language of democracy. And anyone seeking our nation's most powerful office should be clear with the nation's citizens on where they stand in protecting the voice of the voters. We look forward to a positive response to our request. If you have any questions, or would like additional information, please contact Jeff Miller, Vice President for Communications, [miller@civilrights.org](mailto:miller@civilrights.org) (202-466-4281).

Sincerely,

African American Ministers in Action  
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee  
American Association of University Women (AAUW)  
American Civil Liberties Union  
Arizona Advocacy Network  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC  
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote  
Bend the Arc Jewish Action  
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law  
The Center for Civic and Public Policy Improvement  
Center for Popular Democracy and CPD Action  
Common Cause  
Communications Workers of America  
Demos Action  
Fair Elections Legal Network (FELN)  
Georgia Coalition for Peoples' Agenda  
Japanese American Citizens League  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
The League of Women Voters  
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund  
NAACP  
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund  
NALEO Educational Fund  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Disability Rights Network  
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund  
Nebraskans for Civic Reform  
NOVA (Northeast Ohio Voter Advocates)

OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates  
Ohio Voice  
Project Vote  
The Reeb Voting Project of All Souls Church, Unitarian  
Rock the Vote  
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Stand Up! for Democracy in DC (Free DC)  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
Voter Participation Center  
Voting Rights Forward