D003 Addressing the issue of Voter Suppression

Resolved, the House of _______ concurring, That this 79th General Convention of The Episcopal Church hereby directs and encourages the adoption, on a state-by-state basis, of the following package of reforms that would expand voter registration, increase voter eligibility, and make voting processes more accessible by: implementing automatic voter registration; enabling same-day voter registration; preparing for natural disasters; allowing online registration; expanding the circle of people who are eligible to vote; making it easier to vote by mail; enabling no-excuse absentee voting; creating long-term mailing lists for absentee voters; making it easier for people to vote early, in person; enabling weekend voting and extended hours; and, guaranteeing an adequate number of voting locations.

Explanation

The Voting Rights Act's passage was a signature accomplishment of the civil rights movement, the Supreme Court’s 2013 decision in the case, known as Shelby v. Holder, effectively invalidated Section 5 which required state, county and local governments with histories of discrimination (as well as other more technical factors) to submit any changes to voting laws to federal authorities for approval; and
The current administration is using its bully pulpit to falsely allege that millions of ballots were cast illegally and to suggest that early voting should be cut down. Under the current administration’s leadership, politicians with records of aggressively curtailing voting rights will be shaping federal policies; and
At the state level, emboldened by Shelby v. Holder, certain politicians have long been leading a sustained assault on voting rights. In state after state, these politicians have pursued a consistent and ambitious agenda to curtail voting rights, an agenda that includes requiring voter IDs, cutting early voting hours and locations, slashing Sunday voting, and eliminating same-day voter registration. It also includes restricting urban counties’ ability to open additional polling sites and purging voter registration rolls through the use of manipulative and overly zealous techniques. It extends to bans on straight-ticket voting, one byproduct of which is longer voting lines, and on ballot harvesting, a practice by which individuals collect absentee ballots filled by other voters so as to deliver them to election authorities. A brief explanation of each of the reforms asked for in the above Resolution is as follows:
Implement automatic voter registration (AVR): Since March 2015, six states have adopted legislation to automatically register citizens when they come into contact with governmental agencies, notably a Department of Motor Vehicles. Oregon, the first state to adopt this reform (after years of advocacy by the Oregon-based Bus Federation), has registered 225,000 people this way since the start of the year 2016. The payoff: 43 percent of those new voters cast ballots on November 8, 2016.
Enable same-day voter registration (SVR): Same-day voter registration allows qualified residents to register to vote or update their existing registration on Election Day.
Prepare for natural disasters: Absent same-day voter registration bills, rules should provide for the automatic extension of voter registration deadlines in counties where a natural disaster is declared in the weeks leading up to an election. Last year, Florida’s Republican Gov. Rick Scott and North Carolina’s state elections board denied extensions in the wake of Hurricane Matthew. New rules could limit such gamesmanship.

Allow online voter registration: Many states still provide no procedure by which residents can register to vote or update their voter registrations online. Remedying this situation is very feasible since Republicans have been willing to get on board with adopting online registration systems, as they did in Florida in 2015.

Expand the circle of people who are eligible to vote. Restore felons’ voting rights: A recent report by the Sentencing Project laid bare the urgency of countering felon disenfranchisement rules. Two and a half percent of all American adults are disenfranchised, and the share of African Americans who are disenfranchised is triple that (7.4 percent), a disparity that is in keeping with the origins and history of the practice. In four Southern states with severe disenfranchisement laws — Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia — the share of disenfranchised black adults surpasses 20 percent, more than double that of white adults.

Absent the above step, a range of incremental reforms beckon. The most urgent is to restore voting rights to people who have completed their sentences. In Virginia, one of four states to permanently disenfranchise individuals with felony convictions, Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe has used his executive authority to achieve this objective. In August, he began issuing thousands of restoration orders on an individual basis after a narrow ruling by the state Supreme Court blocked him from issuing a blanket
clemency; he has said he will continue to mail individual restoration orders to more than 200,000 people.

Make it easier to vote by mail. Implement all-mail voting: In three states (Colorado, Oregon, and Washington), election authorities mail a ballot to every registered voter. This far-reaching step could be pursued in states like California that already conduct a large share of their elections by mail.

States that don’t wish to go that far in privileging mail voting can take intermediary steps — enabling no-excuse absentee voting where it is not yet available, and creating long-term absentee voter lists.

Enable no-excuse absentee voting: Twenty states — many of them states where Democrats wield political influence, including Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island — require that voters provide a reason they can’t vote on Election Day in order to receive an absentee ballot. New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman is now advocating legislation to implement no-excuse absentee voting in the Empire State, a minimal step that these 20 states should prioritize.

Create long-term mailing lists for absentee voters: The idea behind absentee ballot standing requests is that when a voter requests an absentee ballot in a given year, authorities then continue to automatically send them absentee ballots into the future. This can encourage turnout from voters who tend to only cast a ballot in the fall of a presidential election year, and it makes voting more accessible to people with disabilities, as a recent study documented. In some states, like Florida, requests expire after a few general elections, which can lead to some confusion. A handful of other states, such as California, allow voters to be put on an absentee ballot list permanently.

Make it easier for people to vote early, in person. Thirteen states
provide no option to cast a ballot in person before Election Day.
Democrats already enjoy some power in many of these states,
including Connecticut, Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, and
Rhode Island. Schneiderman’s proposal to create a two-week early
voting window in New York is an urgent starting point for
consideration.
Enable weekend voting and extended hours: Early voting ought to
be helping people who struggle to find the time to vote on Election
Day Tuesdays, especially if they fear the long lines that
disproportionately affect predominantly minority precincts. But
simply adding more voting hours during other weekday working
hours cannot meet that goal. Extended voting hours on weekdays
are needed, as well as weekend voting.
Guarantee an adequate number of voting locations: In Ohio, each
county is restricted to only one early voting location, no matter its
physical size or population. Giving local county boards more
leeway to open additional voting sites can be helpful to ensuring
that highly populated counties are adequately served, but
obstacles such as inequities in the allocation of statewide
resources or the lack of representativeness of some counties’
elected officials loom large. Voting rights advocates should
champion statewide benchmarks as to a minimum number of
polling places per resident and per physical distance, require a
minimum number of voting machines at each voting location, and
put in place rules to ensure an adequate allocation of state
resources.