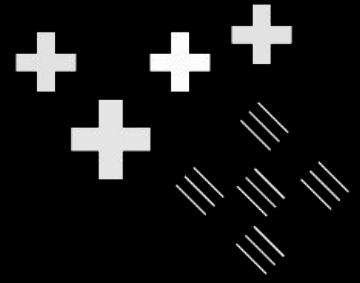




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**Sixty Years After**  
**the Civil Rights Act of 1964:**  
**Ongoing Threats and**  
**the Work Ahead**

**July 2024**

In May 1963, more than 1,000 children peacefully protested to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama. In response, the police [used fire hoses and unleashed police dogs](#) to break up the demonstrators. Images of the children being brutally assaulted shocked the nation and the world, and one month later, in a [June 11 speech](#), President John F. Kennedy unveiled his vision for what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops. It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal,” [President Kennedy said](#) in his speech. “It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.”

It was indeed not the case. At that time in America, only 60 years ago, schools, restaurants, public bathrooms, and even drinking fountains were strictly segregated through much of the South. But in the 1960s, a series of landmark federal laws was enacted to make real the constitutional commitment of equal protection. The first of these, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, catalyzed the most successful peaceful revolution in human history.

## Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Harsh treatment of peaceful demonstrators throughout the South had previously led to civil rights legislation in [1957](#) and [1960](#), but intense opposition in the Senate resulted in laws that, while critically important to this day, did not give the federal government a strong mandate to enforce their anti-discrimination provisions.

In June 1963, as a nation horrified by violence in the South demanded action, President Kennedy sent to Congress the most comprehensive civil rights bill lawmakers had yet seen and invited civil rights leaders to the White House to enlist their support. Though the proposed legislation still fell far short of what these leaders considered to be essential, they nonetheless began taking steps to lobby on the bill.

**“The Civil Rights Act of 1964 catalyzed the most successful peaceful revolution in human history.”**



The House passed the Civil Rights Act on February 10, 1964, after 70 days of public hearings and testimony from more than 275 witnesses, but a 57-day filibuster prevented the Senate from voting. Finally, on June 10, 1964, the Senate voted to end the filibuster and passed the bill a week later.

The Civil Rights Act, signed into law by President Johnson on July 2, 1964, outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex. Different titles of the act prohibited discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and federally funded programs. The act also banned unequal application of voter registration requirements and prohibited denying the right to vote based on non-material errors. It established a framework within the federal government for combating discrimination by giving the U.S. attorney general the power to file discrimination suits, expanding the mandate of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and establishing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to review employment discrimination complaints.

“This Civil Rights Act is a challenge to all of us to go to work in our communities and our States, in our homes and in our hearts, to eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country,” [President Johnson said](#) when he signed the bill into law. “My fellow citizens, we have come now to a time of testing. We must not fail. Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our Nation whole.”

But the law’s passage was not inevitable. A concerted, organized effort by the nation’s civil rights organizations — working through the powerful civil rights coalition that [persists today](#) — ensured that the legislation was strengthened and ultimately became law, and it paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and other key civil rights legislation.



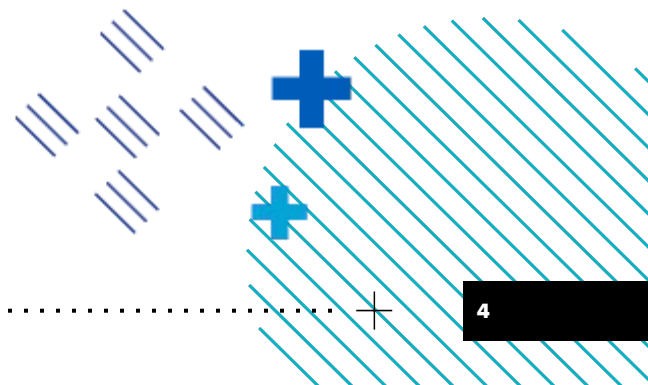
## The Role of The Leadership Conference

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, then known as the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), coordinated the lobbying efforts that led to the strengthening and eventual passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As political scientist Robert D. Loevy [wrote](#), “The super lobby which the Leadership Conference organized behind the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was probably one of the largest and most powerful lobbies ever organized in United States political history.” Loevy’s [“To End All Segregation”](#) and Professor Shamira Gelbman’s [“The Civil Rights Lobby”](#) powerfully document the role of LCCR and the year-long effort to advance the most sweeping civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed.

As Gelbman details, LCCR opened a permanent office with a dedicated staff in the summer of 1963, something that Roy Wilkins — LCCR co-founder and then-chairman — announced at a June 22 White House meeting when he proposed that LCCR should lead the Civil Rights Act lobbying campaign. “The new headquarters enhanced the LCCR’s administrative efficiency, enabling the Leadership Conference to operate as a central hub and clearinghouse for a multifaceted lobbying campaign that mobilized an assortment of human and other resources continuously for nearly a year,” Gelbman writes. “It also facilitated new organizational practices that further enhanced the LCCR’s coordination capacity. One such innovation was the use of the new office space for regular meetings for the Washington representatives of *all* member organizations...”

LCCR’s leadership role in the Civil Rights Act lobbying campaign was ratified during a meeting at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York on July 2, 1963, when roughly 100 leaders gathered to commit themselves to working together and winning passage of a strong civil rights bill. In a [July 25 memo](#) to Leadership Conference organizations, LCCR co-founder and then-secretary Arnold Aronson wrote that “Implementing the decision of the July 2 meeting in New York, we have opened a Washington office to serve as headquarters for the campaign to effect the passage by this Congress of the strongest possible civil rights bill.”

The new civil rights bill faced stiff opposition in Congress, as the previous bills did. But the assassination of President Kennedy later that fall, the intensive lobbying by LCCR and President Lyndon B. Johnson himself, and the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom grassroots mobilization in August put tremendous pressure on Congress to pass the bill. And devastating white supremacist violence that year — including the assassination of Medgar Evers in June and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, which killed four little girls in Birmingham in September — made clear that federal action was needed to advance racial justice and to send a powerful signal that all people were welcome — and would be protected — in the United States.

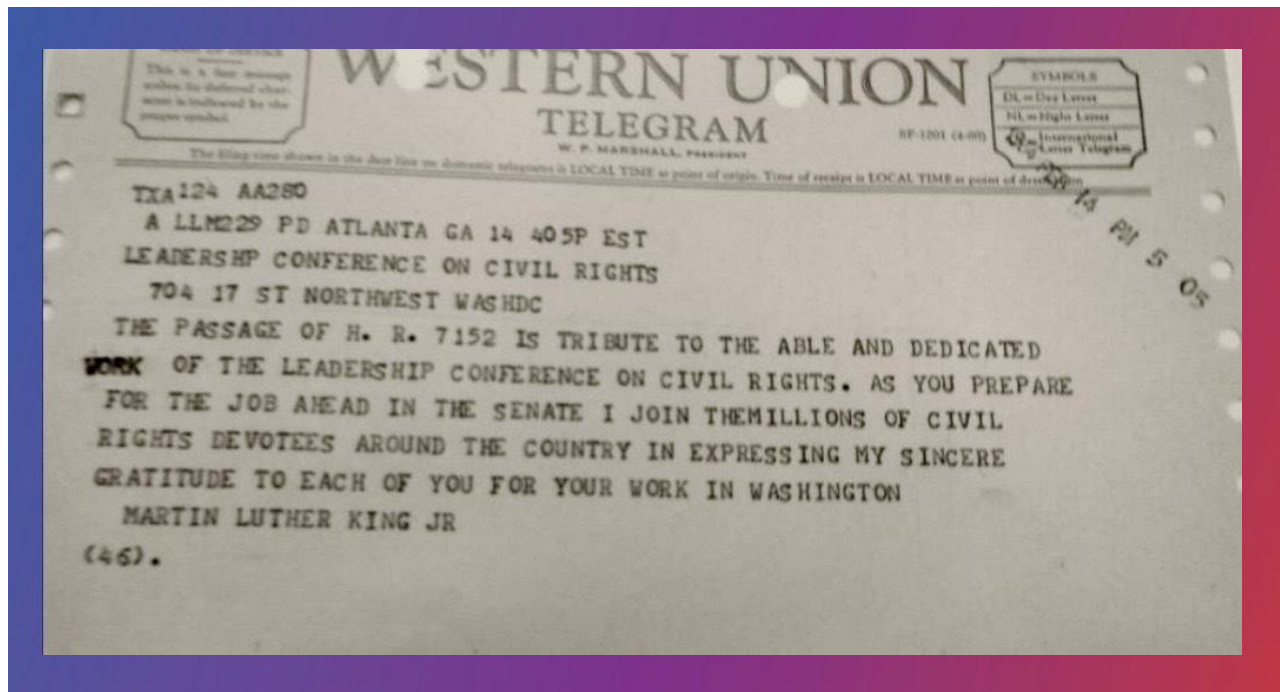


“The President's civil rights program has been introduced in the House by Congressman Celler as H.R. 7152 and in the Senate by Senator Mansfield and 45 others as S. 1731,” [stated a 16-page Leadership Conference memorandum](#) prepared for that July 2 meeting in New York. “It is the most comprehensive civil rights bill ever to receive serious consideration from the Congress of the United States.” It would take exactly one year from that meeting, until July 2, 1964, for President Johnson to sign the legislation.

In February 1964, after the House of Representatives passed the bill, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sent a telegram to The Leadership Conference. “The passage of H.R. 7152 is tribute to the able and dedicated work of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights,” Dr. King wrote. “I join the millions of civil rights devotees around the country in expressing my sincere gratitude to each of you for your work in Washington.”

Dr. King would later support LCCR’s role in leading the lobbying campaign for what became the Voting Rights Act of 1965, writing that “We must all strive to bring about a unified position of the Leadership Conference and then working through the Conference carry that position to fruition. In any event, where disagreements exist they should be worked out fully, debated and resolved, within the framework of the Leadership Conference.” Fewer than six months later, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

The nation has made tremendous progress since the civil rights movement of the 1960s propelled America forward. Decades after these landmark legislative achievements, however, hard-won civil rights gains are under attack.



## Ongoing and Emerging Threats to Civil and Human Rights

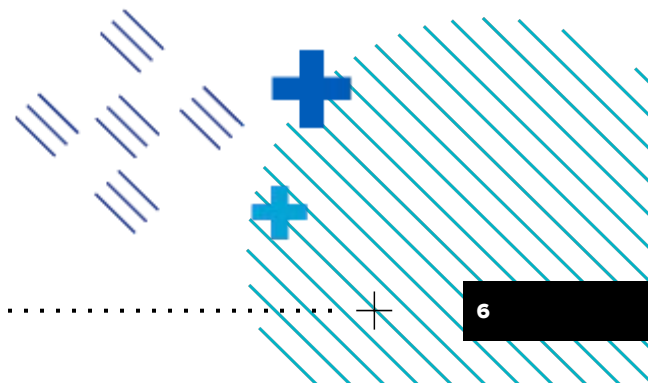
The 60th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act is an important milestone that measures the progress the nation has made and the distance still left to travel on freedom's road. More than half a century ago, civil rights activists across the nation and a coalition of advocates in Washington, D.C., fought to fulfill the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation from a century before. Sixty years later, the nation still struggles to turn the language of that pivotal legislation of the 1960s into living realities for all of its people. And worse, extremist forces are actively working to turn back the clock on civil rights progress.

### Rollback of Rights and Weaponization of Courts

Six decades after the Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in many facets of American life, the nation is still facing efforts to ban diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives, divide communities, and roll back important civil rights achievements. During the previous administration, for example, the United States saw an [across-the-board assault](#) on civil and human rights, including a Department of Justice (DOJ) that pulled back on federal civil rights enforcement and unraveled portions of the DOJ's progress during the Obama administration. And after decades of manufacturing a judicial takeover in response to the progress of the civil rights movement, the previous administration pushed for 234 lifetime confirmations of federal judges, including three Supreme Court justices, who will serve for decades to come — with many of the previous administration's judicial appointees possessing anti-civil rights records.

Already, as seen in far too many decisions — including in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, when the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion — our civil rights protections are being dismantled in some federal courts. Just this term, the Supreme Court's extremist majority allowed for the [criminalization](#) of homelessness, [attacked the rights](#) of Black voters, [hindered](#) federal agency enforcement of civil rights laws and protections, [delayed](#) justice for pregnant people, and [further undermined](#) our democracy and the rule of law.

Today, amidst the devastating decisions, the ongoing and escalating [ethics crisis](#) at the U.S. Supreme Court remains a serious threat to civil rights and democracy. We need a federal judiciary that works for all of us. The decisions judges and justices make shape democracy and determine whether all people can live free and full lives in which civil and human rights are respected and protected. But the wealthy and powerful few have coordinated to stack the deck in their own favor and against the rights of everyday people. This well-funded and long-term agenda seeks to pursue litigation against constitutional and civil rights protections and staff courts with ideological extremists with the goal of rolling back these rights. The impact of this agenda continues to be reflected in radical decisions that upend decades of precedent in order to dismantle the most basic freedoms and recognition of our hard-fought civil and human rights.



**“Today, amidst the devastating decisions, the ongoing and escalating ethics crisis at the U.S. Supreme Court remains a serious threat to civil rights and democracy.”**

The recent rollbacks compound the harms of earlier decisions, including the Supreme Court’s 2001 decision in *Alexander v. Sandoval* eliminating a private right of action with respect to discrimination demonstrated through disparate impact under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Removing this vital tool has undermined the law’s original intent to end discrimination in all its forms and has exposed people to discrimination based on race, color, and national origin.

#### Attacks on DEIA

Extremist forces are seeking to manipulate and weaponize civil rights law and the tools of racial progress to maintain white supremacy and reverse the gains that have been made to create an America that lives up to its ideals as a nation.

In 2023, the Supreme Court rejected more than 40 years of its own precedent to find that the consideration of race as one of many factors in college admissions was unlawful. This wrong-headed decision, although narrowly addressing higher education admissions, has been used as justification to attack race neutral and race conscious policies and programs at all levels.

For example, in addition to disregarding or misrepresenting the [well-established role](#) of the federal government in promoting equal economic opportunity, opponents of racial progress have mischaracterized the Supreme Court’s June 2023 decisions in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard College/ University of North Carolina (UNC)* in a cynical effort to advance a longstanding agenda of economic exclusion and discrimination. The Supreme Court’s decisions last year, which rolled back affirmative action in higher education, do not change employers’ duty to create workplaces free from discrimination, including through efforts designed to achieve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Employers should double down on creating opportunities for all — and the federal government [must demonstrate leadership](#) and provide clarity to that end.

These attacks on diversity also include efforts to prevent critical thinking and erase the history of the nation by banning books that would selectively stamp out the perspectives of Black people, LGBTQ people, and other historically marginalized groups. And shamefully, it includes [ongoing legal efforts](#) by activists like Ed Blum, who now seek to shutter a venture capital firm’s grant program for startups run by Black women. These efforts are intended to intimidate, and more will likely be seen in the months ahead.

## Threats to Full and Fair Voting

Nearly 60 years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, racial discrimination in voting and other threats to safe and fair elections continue to undermine democracy and can have a corrosive effect on the safety and voting rights of people of color and other targeted communities. The Supreme Court’s 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* gutted the heart of the Voting Rights Act and unleashed a tsunami of voter suppression laws that continue in ferocity and intensity today. States and jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination no longer have to seek pre-approval of voting changes to ensure they are not discriminatory — and it shows. States have [passed](#) nearly 100 restrictive voting laws since the *Shelby County* decision. As recounted in The Leadership Conference Education Fund’s report, [“Ten Years After Shelby County v. Holder: Charting the Path Forward for Our Democracy.”](#) the harm to voters has been cumulative and infects every aspect of the electoral process.

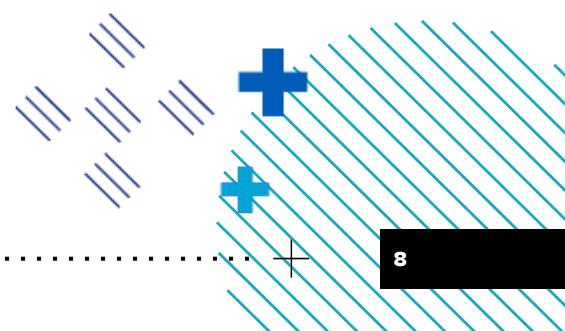
Election-related disinformation, often intended to drive wedges between and suppress the vote across vulnerable communities and communities of color, is also on the rise. Disinformation [propelled](#) the horrific acts of violence on the U.S. Capitol and the attempt to halt the constitutional process for Electoral College ballot certification on January 6, 2021. It didn’t stop there. Both organized extremists and distrusting and dangerous individuals have since been empowered and incited by unfounded election integrity claims that in some cases have been elevated and endorsed by elected leaders, business leaders, and celebrities. These actions have deepened distrust and stoked the spread of hate, harassment, and harm, both during and between election cycles.

With rampant disinformation still spreading about the Big Lie and election processes, increased harassment of election officials, and now the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI), it is imperative that steps are taken to address the spread of falsehoods.

## Emerging Threat of AI and New Technologies

The rapid growth of AI is concerning, but the civil rights community is well-positioned to address it. In 2014, The Leadership Conference, along with 14 signatories, released the [“Civil Rights Principles for the Era of Big Data”](#) calling on the U.S. government and businesses to respect and promote equal opportunity and equal justice in the development and use of data-driven technologies. These principles were [updated](#) in 2020. While AI drives the policy conversation today, these systems are powered by “big data” — and the threats this technology can pose to civil rights have only grown.

With the widespread use of AI, for example, individuals are grappling with the impacts of discriminatory automated systems in just about every facet of life, leading to loss of economic opportunities, higher costs or denial of loans and credit, adverse impact on their employment or ability to get a job, lower quality health care, and barriers to housing. Algorithmic systems are producing discriminatory outcomes that impair equal opportunity and erode civil rights protections. Measures must be taken [to ensure that AI is equitable](#).





## A Rise in Hate

These emerging threats come at a pivotal moment for the United States and during a year when democracy is at stake. As noted in The Leadership Conference Education Fund's recent "[Cause for Concern](#)" report, today's political climate is highly charged. From white supremacist and anti-government movements coalescing and moving more into the political mainstream, to conspiracy theories circulating online, to the amplification of hate by public officials, there are few — if any — signs that tensions will lessen. Movements grounded in attempts to whitewash history and deny the rights of the LGBTQ+ community have turned hate into campaign platforms. Furthermore, the most recent outbreak of violence in the Middle East has created a climate of increased hate targeting Arab, Jewish, and Muslim Americans. This is a climate that has been exploited by white supremacists seeking to further their hateful agendas.

In October 2023, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [released](#) the most recent statistics on hate crimes. These data showed that 2022 was the highest year on record for reported hate crimes since the FBI began publishing the data in 1991 — marking the third consecutive year of record-high reports of hate crimes. Tragically, since 2015, reported hate crimes have nearly doubled.

### Additional Civil Rights Concerns

Beyond this, a number of other serious challenges to civil and human rights remain. From a [discriminatory criminal-legal system](#) and hundreds of [anti-LGBTQ+ bills](#) being introduced across the nation, including devastating attacks on transgender and non-binary children, to efforts to [undermine](#) the 2030 Census with the addition of a citizenship question, the work of The Leadership Conference is more important than ever.

**“As the late Congressman John Lewis often said, ‘We cannot give up now. We cannot give in. We must keep the faith, keep our eyes on the prize.’  
Indeed, there is reason to be hopeful.”**

These are big challenges and taken together represent an enormous threat to fundamental rights and democracy. But historic anniversaries like this one are reminders that the journey toward justice is like an Olympic relay. We take the torch from those who came before and pass it along to those who will follow. This year, as we recall the generation of giants whose sacrifices came before us, we are inspired to make the less risky but still righteous commitment to carry their work forward in protecting and promoting justice throughout the United States.

As the late Congressman John Lewis often said, “We cannot give up now. We cannot give in. We must keep the faith, keep our eyes on the prize.”

Indeed, there is reason to be hopeful.



## Unfinished Business and the Work Ahead

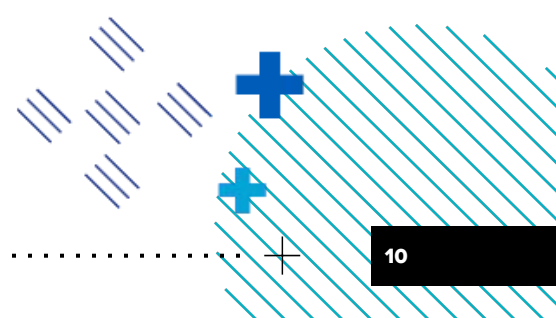
When Congress passed and President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act 60 years ago, the federal government, with bipartisan support, made a formal and ongoing commitment to defend the civil rights of all the people of this nation. Today, that commitment is being renewed.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 2021, President Joseph R. Biden [told the nation](#) that “A cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making moves us. The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer...And now, a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat. To overcome these challenges — to restore the soul and to secure the future of America — requires more than words.”

On many fronts, the Biden administration has taken that call to action seriously. As noted in [a June 2023 Leadership Conference report](#), for example, the Biden administration’s executive action on civil and human rights was a hallmark of its policy agenda during the administration’s first two years. Of the more than 100 executive orders the administration had issued at the time, approximately half had civil rights implications, including on LGBTQ+ rights, fair labor protections, health care access, and immigration reform, among many others. Most notably, this administration has publicly centered equity in its work, and its executive orders on advancing racial equity issued on January 21, 2021 and February 16, 2023 are groundbreaking. Of course, there is more the administration can and should do, including in its full implementation of these important executive orders.

At the Department of Justice, The Leadership Conference was especially pleased with the president’s nomination of former President and CEO [Vanita Gupta](#) to be the first woman of color and first civil rights lawyer to serve as associate attorney general (she [departed](#) DOJ earlier this year) — and with the appointment of [Kristen Clarke](#), a former Leadership Conference board member and ally in the civil rights community, to be the first woman confirmed and first Black woman ever to serve as assistant attorney general for civil rights. Together with Attorney General [Garland](#), the DOJ has been back in the business of enforcing the nation’s federal civil rights laws, including the Civil Rights Act, and has restored independence and integrity to the department’s critical work.

President Biden has also, to date, appointed more than [200 lifetime federal judges](#), and many have been supported by civil rights organizations for being highly qualified, fair-minded, demographically and professionally diverse, and committed to civil and human rights — including Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman and first former public defender to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. These lifetime judges will decide important issues — from voting rights to equal pay to health care access. Our urgent task is to create a more ethical and fair federal judiciary that works for all of us. There is so much at stake, and it is critical that the president and all senators work to fill all judicial vacancies with diverse nominees who are committed to equal justice. This will matter for decades to come.



Much progress has been made since 2021 to achieve the coalition's shared vision of an America as good in practice as it is in promise. Still, [much work remains](#).

The criminal-legal system continues to be a stain on our democracy and [must be transformed](#) into a system that respects the humanity, dignity, and human rights of all people. A welcoming education system that prepares all students for college, career, life, and the full exercise of their social, political, and economic rights remains an elusive goal. There is a critical need for safe and affordable housing for all people living in the United States, and we need equal pay, fair wages, and other important policies that will advance economic justice for all. Comprehensive voting rights reform to ensure the freedom to vote for all voters and to eradicate any and all racial discrimination in voting must be passed by Congress at the very first opportunity. Every person in the United States must have an equal opportunity to access quality health care (including abortion), achieve positive health outcomes, and lead a healthy life. Vigorous enforcement of hate crime protections and expanded, coordinated police-community efforts to track and respond to hate violence and improve hate crime data collection efforts are urgently needed. And it's not too early to work toward a [fair and accurate 2030 Census](#) to ensure that political power and federal resources are fairly allocated among the states.



Beyond this, new, 21st century risks that are outside of our existing legal and policy frameworks will need to be addressed. These include risks posed by AI and other technologies. During a recent event hosted by The Leadership Conference’s [Center for Civil Rights and Technology](#), Charlotte Burrows, chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), emphasized that the EEOC, as well other civil rights enforcement agencies, must remain vigilant to ensure that any advantages that come with the use of AI and other automated technologies don’t come at the price of equal opportunity.

Chair Burrows also paid tribute to the historical work of The Leadership Conference. “The members of The Leadership Conference, as you all know, have been the conscience of our civil rights community for decades. And as we prepare to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which gave birth to my agency, the EEOC, I’d be remiss not to mention that The Leadership Conference also had a key role in advocating for the successful passage of that landmark act,” Chair Burrows said. “So there should be no surprise that The Leadership Conference is once again at the forefront, on the cutting edge, of this important civil rights issue right now in 2024.”

**“We must fight forward —  
together in coalition —  
for the nation and future  
we all deserve.”**

As The Leadership Conference nears its 75th anniversary, the coalition remains committed to these important issues and to advocating on behalf of communities across the nation. In 2024, The Leadership Conference is continuing to [call on tech companies](#) to protect voters against disinformation; [urging the president](#) to promote, protect, and strengthen programs that achieve diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility; [demanding urgent action](#) to address the escalating judicial ethics crisis; [calling for passage](#) of desperately needed federal voting rights legislation; and pushing for additional action to protect our rights and build a multiracial democracy that works for all people.

Civil and human rights progress in America has never been linear, and the whiplash the nation has experienced has understandably caused despair. Though we are living in an era of relentless threats to our democracy and to the fundamental rights that were secured by the civil rights giants who came before us, we must also remember this: We are a diverse coalition of people in America — of every background and identity — who know that we all have a stake in each other’s lives and futures. We will not back down. We are the majority in this country, and we must show up to prevent accelerating the decades-long effort to dismantle our civil and human rights and to ensure a future filled with equal justice and opportunity.

While there are those who seek to roll back the clock, halt racial progress, and undermine the gains we have made as a nation, including those stemming from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, our laws and our values will not allow us to move backwards. We must fight forward — together in coalition — for the nation and future we all deserve.





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