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Congress of the United States House of Representatives
Committee on House Administration
1309 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-6157

Written Testimony of Brandon A. Jessup, “For the People: Our American Democracy”, on House Resolution 1 - For the People Act of 2019

TO: The Honorable Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren of California, Congressman Mr. Rodney Davis of Illinois and the members of the Committee on House Administration

Good morning, chairwoman Lofgren, vice-chair Davis and members of the Committee on House Administration. I am Brandon A. Jessup, resident of the state of Michigan and for most of my adult life I have worked to improve our democracy in the neighborhood and at the ballot box. This work began on my twentieth birthday, September 12, 2001, when I joined the Eastern Michigan University Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Youth and College Division. I’m sure I mirrored the actions of many of America’s youth post 9/11; I also had some additional inspiration in my life along the way. This inspiration has guided me to stand on the shoulders of American greats like Coleman Alexander Young, Bayard Rustin, Coretta Scott King and Barack Obama to bring progress home through our society’s challenges.

I am the child of three products of America’s “Great Migration”; my birth parents were too young to participate at the time, yet the influence of big money in politics had shaped their lives and mine before I was born. Like many southern states, it was a known fact that Louisiana’s adoption institutions or any public institutions for that matter weren’t necessarily kind to little black boys. Being my mother’s second child in as many years, arrangements were made for an informal adoption to secure a good home for her incoming baby boy. That good home would land me in Detroit, Michigan.

My upbringing helped me to expand on the values from the civil rights, black liberation and women’s rights movements my parents lived. My father and step-father pushed northward to find employment in the auto industry as sharecroppers from Kentucky and Tennessee respectively, they soon would find brotherhood in the United Auto Workers. My mother worked through school to become a registered nurse through a local community-college program, an organizer at heart, she would be a proud card-carrying member of the Michigan Nurses Association, her church and later the United Auto Workers as well. My family’s experiences and values helped me understand that voting is the service required for the privilege of democracy and our consistent participation in it, improves the entire American experience.

The policies proposed in H.R. 1, For the People Act of 2019, heed citizen-led movements in states across this country for a better democracy that is ethical, efficient and transparent. Big money in politics has replaced the heavy stick of violence and oppression to deploy voter suppression over broader communities through sophisticated gerrymandering and dark money.

The past decade in Michigan has left great marks across our nation’s application of democracy in our society. As a response to The Great Recession of 2009, conservative organizations and advocacy groups worked with state institutions such as the Michigan Chamber of Commerce to introduce sweeping legislation that would disempower citizens by removing their elected officials with appointed overseers, increasing taxes on seniors and pensioners while divesting from public services and infrastructure.

Michigan's new emergency manager law protected by a gerrymandered state legislature and congressional delegation caused a chain of events that lead to the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the United States and 10,000 children drinking lead contaminated water in the city of Flint. April 25th will mark the 5th year of the Flint Water Crisis or 1,825 days of using bottled water to cook, eat and clean; a sad anniversary clean water advocates like Nayyirah Shariff, Bishop Bernadine Jefferson and Mrs. Claire McClinton remind me of daily. This injustice continues to be fueled by malfunctions in our democracy that reward corporations over citizens, and profits over people. I'm asking this committee to set the course to put ethics back into our democracy.

In the spring of 2011, the non-partisan campaign to repeal Michigan's emergency manager law launched and succeeded at the ballot box in November of 2012. However, in the dead of night, lame-duck legislators overturned the will of Michigan voters; replacing their defeated dictatorship bill with a similar version and eliminating the right of workers to collectively bargain in Michigan. The following four years would expose the ugly truth of big money in politics. The Flint Water Crisis remains unresolved, the vacuum of leadership, ethics and accountability in government has eroded the trust of many of the city's residents. Yet, organizations such as Flint Rising and the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan have remained on the ground fighting for justice.

The spirit found protecting the future of Michigan from poisoned water and smog filled air is also finding proactive ways to restore voting rights with common-sense reforms that improve democracy. Over forty years ago, Michigan pioneered new techniques to encourage residents to register to vote. This ingenuity led by Michigan's first African-American to be elected to statewide office, Secretary of State Richard Austin was also the first of its kind in the nation. It was also the last set of reforms the state would see until November 2018, when a near super-majority of voters, approved constitutional amendments to end gerrymandering and provide common-sense reforms to make voting accessible to all. I am proud to say that I helped lead this second charge to protect and improve our democracy; mobilizing a twenty-year record turnout of over 4 million voters.

H.R. 1, For the People Act of 2019, clearly answers the call for a new Voting Rights Act using the template from states like Michigan, Florida and Missouri for a more accessible Democracy. Michigan's expansion of democracy with no-excuse absentee voting and same-day registration is estimated to deliver 300,000 new voters in 2020. Florida has restored voting rights for all, regardless of criminal history and more states like Colorado and Ohio are creating policy for more fair voting districts. H.R. 1 represents all these ideals and more. I hope that my story here inspires you all, the way so many have inspired me in my life to trust the democratic process; a democratic process built on inclusion and transparency with the ability to empower citizens to empower themselves and their communities.

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