



April 1, 2025

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil and human rights organization born in the Deep South to carry forward the unfinished work of the Civil Rights Movement, we write to (re) introduce you to our work and share our priorities for the 119th Congress.

For over five decades, SPLC has worked to build a more just and equitable America, ensuring that all people — especially Black and Brown communities — have the opportunity to thrive. This commitment drives our focus on four areas: eradicating poverty, reimagining the criminal legal system, strengthening democracy, and combating hate and extremism. Through litigation, community mobilization, and advocacy in Washington and across Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi, we advance policies that protect civil rights, provide opportunity, and confront systemic injustice. We are proud to work with Congress and officials from both parties because we recognize that Congress has at times been the last and only line of defense in making the Constitution's promise a reality for people in the Deep South and beyond.

Today, however, Congress's role in protecting Americans' fundamental rights and the pillars of our democracy isn't just being eroded — it's being deliberately undone. In the past two months alone, the Trump administration has bypassed Congress in ways that once seemed unthinkable: freezing funds Congress had already allocated to support Americans in need; firing inspectors general without proper notice; hollowing out federal departments without approval; and handing an unelected tech billionaire the power to access Americans' private data, profit off the government, and weaken agencies' ability to serve the public — with little to no oversight.

What's more, the president is unilaterally seeking to roll back and weaponize laws duly passed by Congress. In the face of these blatantly unconstitutional acts, Congress cannot stand by. You must act. You must use every lever — including the power of the purse and oversight — to check the executive and defend the Constitution, and by extension, the American people. In the coming days, we'll send you a detailed letter with specific steps Congress must take to confront this crisis and push back against the president's dangerous drift toward authoritarian rule. Our policy priorities for the 119th Congress — detailed below — depend on Congress remaining a coequal branch of government, serving the American people — not any administration.

Cross-Cutting Priorities

Preserving Anti-Discrimination Protections (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility)

Over the past two months, we have seen a relentless, coordinated assault on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility — the principle that every American, regardless of race or background, deserves a fair shot at the American Dream. These attacks mask a broader agenda: weakening civil rights protections,

ending anti-discrimination enforcement, and limiting opportunities for millions — including women, Black and brown people, LGBTQ+ individuals, Americans with disabilities, and veterans. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility make our country, democracy, and economy stronger— and Congress must protect it.

- Congress must ensure that critical civil rights offices remain intact and are enforcing civil rights laws equally and collecting and publishing demographic data; reject any efforts to weaken or reverse these laws; and oppose attempts to dismantle DEIA initiatives, whether through legislation or the illegal weaponization of federal grants.

Advancing International Human Rights

From helping to create the United Nations to drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights have long been a key part of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Yet, today that legacy is under attack. This administration has withdrawn from the U.N. Human Rights Council, defunded a UN refugee agency, renounced legal commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and ordered a review of all ratified treaties for potential withdrawal. Despite this unprecedented assault, Congress can protect these commitments by reaffirming U.S. leadership and preserving the legal framework that upholds human rights at home and abroad.

- Congress must strengthen U.S. human rights commitments by overseeing compliance with U.N. treaties; support laws that align with international standards; ensure federal agencies implement treaty requirements and recommendations; oppose executive overreach on ratified treaties; and fully fund the U.N. budget, including arrearages.

Safeguarding Civil Rights in Technology

Technology is infiltrating nearly every part of American life — influencing decisions about housing, hiring, and benefits, and driving the spread of misinformation and disinformation online. The rise of A.I., algorithms, and automated decision-making systems has accelerated this shift and will only continue to do so. These technologies can offer real benefits, but without safeguards, they risk exacerbating discrimination and causing harm — costing people jobs, housing, benefits, and even their freedom.

- Congress must conduct rigorous oversight to establish and enforce guardrails to ensure these technologies are used transparently, adhere to and protect civil rights laws, prevent discrimination — particularly against historically marginalized communities, and advance equity and opportunity for all.

Advancing Immigrant Justice

As xenophobia and disinformation spread unabated., lawmakers are exploiting the demonization of immigrants—especially Black and Brown immigrants—to push a radical agenda that threatens civil rights, civil liberties, and America’s identity as a nation shaped by immigrants. Reforming our immigration laws to create a humane, functional system that reflects our values is an economic, racial, and criminal justice imperative that demands congressional action.

- Congress must reject legislation or actions that advance inhumane measures, such as mass deportation, family separation, privately run for-profit immigrant detention, racial and ethnic profiling, mass surveillance, the criminalization of immigrants, and the deputizing of local police to pursue immigrants.
- Congress must enact immigration policies that value immigrants and refugees; promote family reunification; ensure humane, non-discriminatory enforcement; support programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), humanitarian parole, and protections in sensitive locations; and fund legal representation for immigrants.

Budget and Appropriations

A budget is not just a set of numbers—it is a reflection of what and who Congress values. Too many Americans are struggling to stay afloat, paying more for everything from food, utilities, and rent. Any budget should ease those burdens, not create new ones. As SPLC stated in its February letter to the House, our country deserves a budget that puts people first—not just the wealthy and big corporations. We need a budget that protects access to healthcare, strengthens our social safety nets, and ensures that every American has a fair shot at economic stability.

- Congress must reject any budget or appropriation that cuts funding for essential services—such as healthcare, education, food assistance, and other critical programs—that millions of Americans rely on, especially to fund tax breaks for the wealthy.
- Congress must fully fund our social safety net programs to lift more people out of poverty and allocate adequate resources to provide economic mobility, protect civil rights, and strengthen election administration.

Oversight & Nominations

As a co-equal branch of government, Congress plays a critical role in holding presidential power accountable. Through hearings, the power of the purse, and legislative authority, Congress ensures no president is above the law and that the rights of all Americans are protected. Beyond that, through “Advice and Consent,” Senators can prevent the confirmation of unqualified individuals who, by leading agencies or serving on the federal bench, make decisions that affect the lives of millions. As we have noted before, this responsibility is not just important, it is essential. And today, it is more urgent than ever.

- Congress must exercise rigorous oversight of executive branch actions to prevent illegal overreach, including efforts to bypass Congressional powers, violate civil and human rights, misuse appropriated funds, or weaken essential federal offices and staff.
- Congress must rigorously vet all executive and judicial nominees to ensure they are qualified, ethical, committed to civil rights, and, most importantly, dedicated to serving all Americans, not just a president or political party.

Issue Specific Policy Priorities

1. Strengthening Democracy & Voting Rights

The ability to elect our leaders and shape the future of our communities is fundamental to American democracy. Yet today, that core principle is under attack. The Supreme Court’s erosion of the Voting Rights Act, coupled with a wave of anti-voter laws at the state level, has made it harder for many Americans—especially in the Deep South—to vote, robbing them of a voice in our democracy. At the same time, under-resourced election administrators and outdated infrastructure further threaten Americans’ ability to cast their ballots. Congress must protect and expand voting rights while providing election officials with the resources they need.

Priorities

- Congress must pass legislation to restore and strengthen the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and establish a new baseline national standard to ensure access to the ballot.
- Congress must reject any legislation that creates new barriers to voting and disenfranchises eligible voters.
- Congress must authorize substantiating in future fiscal years.
- Congress must conduct rigorous oversight of the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division to ensure faithful enforcement of existing voting rights laws and prevent the misuse of federal resources to undermine these laws or restrict voting, especially for Black and brown communities.
- Congress must reject any legislation that gives a president or administration the power to investigate, shut down, or silence nonprofit tax-exempt organizations based on a unilateral accusation of wrongdoing. Congress must reject efforts to eliminate diversity and equal opportunity programs and efforts to restrict the teaching of accurate history or banning select books in schools – initiatives which tacitly endorse discrimination and hate against Black and Brown communities.
- Congress must support and fund the Census Bureau to address undercounts, improve data quality, and ensure a fair and accurate 2030 Census, while also resisting efforts to exclude non-citizens from apportionment counts, add a citizenship question, or undermine the American Community Survey.

2. Combatting Hate and Extremism

For over 50 years, the SPLC has tracked extremist groups to expose their bigotry. Recent political polarization, disinformation, and rising racial, ethnic, and religious tensions have led to the highest

number of hate crimes on record in the U.S., with Black people most affected, followed by Hispanics, Jews, Arabs, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Over the past several years, domestic intelligence agencies have classified racially motivated violent extremists and anti-government groups as the most lethal domestic terrorist threats to our country. Congress must condemn white supremacist and bigoted speech and prioritize policies that take a holistic, integrated approach to address the root causes of extremism and interrupt radicalization.

Priorities

Congress must pass legislation to improve law enforcement hate crime reporting by conditioning federal funding for large state and federal agencies on accurate reporting of credible hate crime data to the FBI.

- Congress must reject efforts to restrict or condition funding for colleges and universities unless the institution adopts restrictions on its academic freedom and a narrow, speech-limiting definition of antisemitism.
- Congress must reject efforts to eliminate diversity and equal opportunity programs and efforts to restrict the teaching of accurate history or banning select books in schools – initiatives which tacitly endorse discrimination and hate against Black and Brown communities.
- Congress must authorize funding for federal, state, and local programs to promote democracy and civics education as well as digital, media, and information literacy initiatives, with a focus on teaching truth through inclusive education
- Congress must boost funding for hate crime prevention, trainings, and state hotlines to expand victim reporting, while conducting oversight to ensure the DOJ and FBI collect accurate data, as required by the Hate Crime Statistics Act and the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crime Act.
- Congress must rigorously oversee the Department of Defense's enforcement of Section 1749 of the FY 2020 NDAA, which prohibits naming Army bases after Confederate leaders, and ensure continued enforcement of the 2021 anti-extremist guidance.

3. Decarceration and Decriminalization

The U.S. criminal legal system remains a stain on our democracy. From enslavement and convict leasing to Jim Crow, it has been a driver of racial and economic injustice. This legacy has resulted in structures that deny people opportunities, legal equality, and the human dignity they deserve, particularly in the Deep South. Between 1990 and 2019, the prison population in the U.S. grew by 86%, with the South seeing an alarming 127% increase. The roots of modern-day policing began as militias and police departments that were organized first to quell slave rebellions and capture enslaved people attempting to escape, then later to enforce Jim Crow laws against Black people. This legacy remains today through an over-policing of Black communities, and is especially prominent in the Deep South. Louisiana incarcerates an average of 50,000 people daily, with Black people imprisoned at nearly four times the rate of white people. In Florida, over 300,000 children have at least one parent behind bars, and Alabama incarcerates Black kids at 2.5 times the rate of white youth. Congress can pave the way to justice by holding police accountable, ending draconian laws, and reimagining public safety. Congress can pave the way to justice by holding police accountable, ending draconian laws, and reimagining public safety.

Priorities

- Congress must pass legislation to reform civil asset forfeiture, a mechanism that allows law enforcement to take a person's property and use that money to pad police budgets, even if the person has not committed a crime. The process can be improved by ensuring indigent property owners have appointed legal counsel, requiring clear evidence that the person was involved in criminal activity, and closing the equitable sharing loophole.
- Congress must pass legislation to end discriminatory policing, hold law enforcement accountable, restrict harmful practices, abolish qualified immunity, and mandate disaggregated data collection on police-community interactions.
- Congress must pass legislation that eliminates sentencing disparities, mandatory pretrial detention and mandatory minimums for drug offenses that disproportionately impact Black and Brown people.

- Congress must reject legislation and executive actions that expand criminalization and racial disparities, particularly those targeting young people, people seeking reproductive care, and other marginalized communities.
- Congress must decriminalize cannabis by removing it from the Controlled Substances Act, expunge records for federal marijuana convictions, and invest in business opportunities for individuals in communities impacted by the “War on Drugs.”
- Congress must pass legislation to create a Community Safety division within the Department of Health and Human Services to support violence interruption, behavioral health, housing security, and other community safety programs.
- Congress must pass legislation to fund grants for deploying mental health professionals for calls involving people suffering from mental health and substance abuse, and fund mental health and trauma-informed services in schools, including youth sports, mentoring, and counseling, and after-school programming.
- Congress must fulfill its duty to conduct oversight by ensuring law enforcement agencies that receive federal funding are adhering to basic minimum standards such as not engaging in racial discrimination, not violating the rights of people they are sworn to protect and serve, or engaging in excessive force, discriminatory harassment, false arrests, coercive sexual conduct, and unlawful stops, searches or arrests.

4. Eradicating Poverty

America is the wealthiest nation in the world, yet nearly 37 million people—more than 10% of the population—live in poverty and millions more barely scraping by. In the Deep South, where deeply rooted racism and economic inequality intertwine, the problem of poverty is particularly pronounced. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana have some of the highest poverty rates in the nation, with Louisiana and Mississippi leading the country. In Mississippi, for example, 28% of children live in poverty, 23% struggle to meet their basic needs, and 18%—nearly 1 in 5—go to bed hungry most nights. The poverty experienced by millions of Americans is not inevitable; it’s a policy choice. During the pandemic, when Congress expanded investments in critical programs like the child tax credit, housing support, Medicaid, and SNAP, millions of families were lifted out of poverty, and the child poverty rate dropped by nearly half. Congress can—and must—build on this progress and fully invest in policies that lift more families out of poverty, giving them the chance not just to survive, but to truly thrive.

Priorities

- Congress must pass legislation to ensure wealthy individuals and corporations pay their fair share and expand the Child Tax Credit, Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, Dependent Care Tax Credit, and Earned Income Tax Credit for more working-class families.
- Congress must pass a Farm Bill reauthorization to modernize the food and farm system, fully invest in farmers and ranchers, and protect and strengthen SNAP and other vital nutrition supports to address hunger in the U.S.
- Congress must protect and fully fund social safety net programs, ensuring they reach those in need and provide comprehensive and equitable access to all families in need.
- Congress must reject efforts to defund or impose additional barriers to social safety net and anti-poverty programs, including SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, CHIP, WIC, Head Start, housing assistance, and disaster relief.
- Congress must reimagine the TANF program to ensure benefits are spent directly to support needy families without prohibitive barriers and the program has more accountability and transparency to prevent, monitor, and penalize the intentional misuse of federal funds by contractors and other sub-recipient grantees.
- Congress must pass legislation that funds affordable housing, prevents the criminalization of individuals experiencing homelessness, and addresses systemic land loss and wealth extraction in Black and Brown communities.
- Congress must block efforts to dismantle the Department of Education and ensure that education—one of the nation’s most effective drivers of opportunity and economic mobility—is accessible to all children

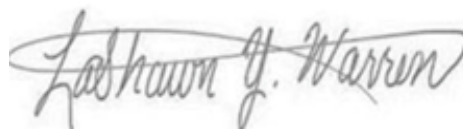
- Congress must conduct rigorous oversight of executive actions that violate civil rights laws and usurp Congressional powers including the illegal impoundment of appropriated and statutorily authorized funds to health care, nutrition, housing, disaster relief, education, and other public benefits; the disregard of Congressional authority and procedures; the weaponization of federal funds to advance the political whims of the President; and the reckless dismantling of critical federal offices and firing of essential staff.

While not an exhaustive list, acting upon the core issues outlined above will help move the country closer to the American ideals of equality, justice, fairness, and opportunity. Please consider SPLC as a resource and a partner as you explore effective ways to address these critical issues. We look forward to working with you during the 119th Congress. If you have any questions, please contact Sakira Cook, Federal Policy Director, at sakira.cook@splcenter.org.

Sincerely,



Margaret Huang
President and CEO
Southern Poverty Law Center



LaShawn Warren
Chief Policy Officer
Southern Poverty Law Center

cc: Members of the United States Senate