

# GENERATION PROGRESS



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## Ten Ways the New Congress Can Act for Young People

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# Introduction

In the 2018 midterm elections, young people ran for office, canvassed neighborhoods, rallied their communities, and organized online<sup>1</sup>—all in hopes of electing a governing body that was more representative of themselves and their values. In the months preceding the historic election, media outlets were fixated on the perception that young people were apathetic and incompetent, not engaged enough to turn out, and unable to comprehend the postal system needed to cast a mail-in ballot.<sup>2</sup> The narrative turned out to be false; during the 2018 cycle, young people campaigned around the issues they cared about and voted in historic numbers. In fact, 31 percent of young people turned out to vote, an increase of 10 points compared to the 2014 midterm elections.<sup>3</sup> With Millennials projected to be the largest voting bloc by 2020, young people are poised to change the politics of their communities, and the nation.<sup>4</sup>

By seizing their power, young people showed America that they have what it takes to tip the scales on many of today's most critical issues, including democracy, gun violence prevention, criminal justice reform, immigration, climate change, women's health, student debt, and diversity and inclusion.

Now is the time for accountability. As the 116th Congress works to frame their priorities for the next two years, members must center young people in their policy proposals and legislation. Generation Progress and the Center for American Progress have identified policy areas that are important to young people and can drive youth civic engagement and voter participation.

# Democracy and Voting

Young people continue to face a variety of obstacles when registering to vote, with transient young voters disproportionately affected. These obstacles include arbitrary registration deadlines, confusing registration policies, and restrictive residency requirements. With young people expected to become the largest voting bloc in the electorate, the 116th Congress needs to ensure Millennials and Generation Z are able to register to vote and fully participate in the democratic process.

- **Automatic Voter Registration (AVR):** Through automatic voter registration, voting-eligible citizens are automatically registered to vote using information provided by state agencies, which may include colleges and universities.<sup>5</sup> AVR addresses many of the problems young people face in the voter registration process and helps ensure their voices are heard.<sup>6</sup> With AVR, an individual's registration information is portable and can follow the registrant if or when they move.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly useful for young people who are highly transient because of school or work.<sup>8</sup>
- **Pre-registration:** Pre-registration allows eligible 16- and 17-year-old citizens to pre-register to vote before their 18th birthday.<sup>9</sup> Once they turn 18, their voter registration is automatically activated without any additional effort on the part of the individual.<sup>10</sup> Pre-registration helps ensure young people are seamlessly integrated into the democratic process once they are eligible, is an effective way of demystifying the electoral process, and connects young people to political discourse at an early age.<sup>11</sup>

- **Election Day Registration (EDR):** States that allow eligible citizens to register and vote on the same day, including Election Day, consistently have the highest voter participation in the country.<sup>12</sup> EDR removes barriers in the voter registration process, such as arbitrary voter registration deadlines that keep countless young people from voting each election cycle.<sup>13</sup> According to one study, young people from states with EDR policies were, on average, nine percent more likely to vote in the 2008 election than those living in states without the policy.<sup>14</sup>

Congress should also adopt policies that would establish greater transparency in campaign finance and give young people more opportunities to participate in politics. Through policies like small-donor public financing, young people who donate to campaigns with small donations would have their voices amplified, and candidates would be able to run for public office without relying on funding from the wealthiest few.<sup>15</sup> By enhancing disclosure laws, states can crack down on secret campaign ads run by big donors which use “dark money” organizations as a cover.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, banning lobbyist fundraising would abolish the worst kinds of pay-to-play, and would help assure young people that members of Congress are working for them rather than special interests.<sup>17</sup>

# Gun Violence Prevention

Gun violence is one of the leading killers of young people, surpassing car accidents, and coming second only to death by drug overdose.<sup>18</sup> In 2017, 12,355 young people between the ages of 15 and 29 died from firearm-related injuries.<sup>19</sup> Youth of color are disproportionately impacted by gun violence, with young African American men being killed by a gun at a rate 19 times greater than the national rate.<sup>20</sup> As young people reach greater political power, their engagement with elected leaders to pass commonsense legislation will be vital to help end gun violence and stop this epidemic from ravaging our youth.

- **Require universal background checks:** Current federal law requires only federally licensed gun dealers to conduct a background check before selling a firearm; however, gun sales conducted by private sellers online, at gun shows, or elsewhere, do not require a background check.<sup>21</sup> The current background check system has stopped over 3 million illegal firearm sales.<sup>22</sup> Requiring all gun sales conducted in the U.S. to run a background check will help ensure that individuals who are prohibited from gun possession do not continue to have easy access to guns.
- **Increase funding for local violence prevention and intervention programs:** Local stakeholders are a vital part in gun violence solutions. Community-based programs have significant impacts. In Connecticut, three cities saw gun homicides decline by 50 between 2011 and 2016 thanks to the Group Violence Intervention Program.<sup>23</sup> Richmond, California used a comprehensive strategy to address gun violence in the city that reduced gun violence by 71 percent from 2007 to 2016.<sup>24</sup>



Investing in evidence-based programs will help make communities safer and more secure.

- **Ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines:** Assault weapons, which are semi-automatic firearms with a detachable magazine and a military-style accessory like a pistol grip, and high-capacity magazines dramatically increase the lethality of shootings. The design of a weapon influences the ability to shoot more people, leading to more injuries and fatalities. 155 percent more people were shot, and 47 percent more people died, when assault weapons or high-capacity magazines were used in mass shootings between January 2009 and July 2015.<sup>25</sup> To make our communities safer, lawmakers should ban the private ownership of these weapons of war.
- **Enable the Centers for Disease Control to research gun violence as a public health issue:** In 1996, Congress restricted the ability of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to research gun violence as a public health crisis through a combination of restrictive budget language, known as the Dickey Amendment, and a cut to the agency's budget of the exact amount previously spent on this research.<sup>26</sup> These actions had a chilling effect on gun violence research: gun violence is one of the top thirty causes of death in the U.S. but is the least researched.<sup>27</sup> The CDC's inability to produce research on this topic makes it possible for lawmakers to claim ignorance on the many aspects of gun violence in the U.S., including the effective intervention policies that reduce gun deaths. Congress should heed the demands of gun violence prevention advocates, medical organizations, and former Representative Jay Dickey himself, to restore funding for the CDC to research this public health crisis.
- **Disarm all domestic abusers:** Under existing federal law, some domestic abusers are barred from possessing a firearm, while gaps in the law make it possible for others, like those who have been convicted of abusing a dating partner, convicted of misdemeanor-

level stalking, or subjected to a temporary restraining order, to buy a firearm.<sup>28</sup> In the U.S., 4.5 million women have been threatened with a firearm by an intimate partner.<sup>29</sup> Evidence shows that when a gun is in a home with a history of domestic violence, the likelihood of the woman being murdered increases by 500 percent.<sup>30</sup> The law needs to be reformed to recognize all forms of domestic abuse as a disqualifying factor for firearm possession.

- **Make extreme risk protection orders (ERPO) available in every state:** ERPO laws are tools that enable family members or law enforcement to request a judge temporarily remove guns from a person who has shown to be a risk to themselves or others. In Maryland, within the first three months of the law being implemented, guns were seized after four significant threats were made against schools.<sup>31</sup> In Connecticut, for every 10 to 20 ERPOs issued, one death was prevented.<sup>32</sup> These laws are effective at identifying persons at the highest risk for suicide who have access to guns. This life-saving legal tool should be available across the country.

Gun violence is a crisis that impacts countless lives across the U.S. It is stealing the lives of America's youth and shattering communities every day. It is imperative that Congress pass commonsense laws to address gun violence.

# Criminal Justice Reform

Criminal justice reform must continue to be a priority for the 116th Congress. The House of Representatives in particular has a mandate to propose bold, sweeping legislation that reforms the criminal justice system and reverses federal policies which led to our devastating history of mass incarceration. In doing so, Congress should continually remind itself of the commitment its members made when the FIRST STEP Act was enacted in December—that the bill’s passage mark the beginning, and not the end, of Congressional action on criminal justice reform. In this Congress, the focus should be on legislation that aligns with Smart on Crime principles—those that are fair, just and proportional, comprehensive, and driven by data and evidence.

- **Marijuana legalization:** The tide has turned on marijuana. A majority of states have liberalized their marijuana laws, and 68 percent of voters support marijuana legalization.<sup>33</sup> The federal government must keep pace with the country’s changing views, especially as current laws continue to disproportionately criminalize communities of color. It is imperative that any bill to legalize marijuana include strong provisions that clear marijuana criminal records and ensure meaningful reinvestment in communities of color ravaged by the War on Drugs.
- **Pretrial reform:** The jail population has exploded over the past three decades, mainly due to the growing pretrial population. Research has shown that even a short time behind bars results in harmful outcomes. Yet, across the country, states and localities continue to rely on money bail, even in instances where the defendant is not a threat to public safety. In many cases, a person is held in jail simply because of an inability to pay. The federal government must assist

jurisdictions in developing a more just and effective pretrial system that reduces overall detention and addresses the racial and wealth gap disparities created by money bail.

- **Data:** A fundamental problem with the way federal public safety and criminal justice policies are created is the lack of reliable data on several critical issues. Without adequate data, legislators can neither develop informed proposals nor effectively combat the fearmongering behind tough-on-crime ideas. Congress can substantially improve the timeliness and quality of national data collections, such as the Uniform Crime Report published by the FBI, and push for more types of data collections on issues such as prosecutorial reform and police accountability.
- **Criminal records:** Providing a second chance for people convicted of criminal offenses is an oft-repeated mantra of reformers, but there are more than 40,000 collateral consequences of a criminal conviction that pose barriers to opportunity and rehabilitation. Part of the solution is ensuring that criminal records are not used by employers and landlords to shut people out of opportunities. Congress must pass legislation to automatically expunge certain federal offenses and provide grants to help states do the same at the state level. This will help mitigate some of the collateral consequences that result from a criminal conviction.

# Immigration

Young people have been at the forefront of immigration advocacy for well over a decade. For years, young people have fought to pass the Dream Act,<sup>34</sup> protect the wider undocumented community against enforcement overdrive, and defend access to the refugee and asylum systems.<sup>35</sup> Young people made their voices heard in the 2018 midterm elections, and now is the time for Congress to step up and pass protections for the most vulnerable among them.<sup>36</sup>

- **Put Dreamers and TPS holders on a pathway to citizenship:** Due to the actions of the Trump administration, nearly a million people—including 700,000 DACA recipients<sup>37</sup> and 300,000 TPS holders<sup>38</sup>—are in danger of losing their work permits and potentially being subjected to detention and deportation. The average DACA recipient came to the country at age six,<sup>39</sup> while the average TPS holder from El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti has been in the country for 22 years.<sup>40</sup> An even greater number of Dreamers—people who came to the country at a young age—were shut out of DACA entirely, either because they missed the strict age cutoff when the program was announced, or because they were too young to apply when the Trump administration ended the program.<sup>41</sup> And while court injunctions have, to date, stopped the Administration from tearing away status from DACA recipients and some TPS holders, people with both statuses remain vulnerable, and in limbo.<sup>42</sup> Congress must immediately pass legislation to put Dreamers and TPS holders on a pathway to permanent status and citizenship.

# Climate

In October 2018, the world's preeminent climate scientists provided another stark reminder of the urgency of climate change. In a landmark report, the scientists warned that the world needs to slash greenhouse gas emissions almost in half by 2030 in order to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, a key threshold for avoiding some of the most catastrophic impacts of climate change.<sup>43</sup> Instead of leading the world's response to this crisis, the Trump administration has announced its intention to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement and is trying to dismantle all climate progress achieved under President Obama. New leadership in the 116th Congress will have the opportunity to challenge the Trump administration's climate denialism and propose bold new solutions to tackle climate change and build a clean energy economy. In the 2018 election, more than 1,400 candidates for public office at all levels of government committed to achieving 100 percent clean energy by 2050.<sup>44</sup>

- **Commit to clean energy:** Many members of 116th Congress have already offered ambitious proposals to tackle climate change, including carbon tax legislation<sup>45</sup> and the recent joint resolution from Sen. Ed Markey and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on a Green New Deal.<sup>46</sup> In the coming months, members of the House of Representatives are also likely to debate and vote on additional legislation that provide important steps toward climate action, including legislation to expand clean energy deployment across the country.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** One critical moment will arise when Congress begins to consider massive investment in the nation's infrastructure,

from roads and bridges to water systems and power lines. Upgrading our nation's infrastructure is a key component of achieving a clean energy economy. For the last century, the United States government, at all levels, has invested in infrastructure that centers around the consumption and combustion of fossil fuels. Congress needs to craft a new kind of infrastructure proposal that incorporates climate action by committing to a carbon pollution reduction goal. Most of these investments are proven ideas that we need to scale up, like installing more electric vehicle chargers; deploying more clean energy; retrofitting homes and businesses to make them more energy efficient; and modernizing the electricity grid to accommodate more renewable energy. It is critical that Congress seize this moment on infrastructure as part of its work to take action on climate.

# Women's Health and Reproductive Rights

While the Trump administration's attacks on women's health and reproductive rights have been felt by women and their families across the country, the impact of these attacks has fallen particularly hard on young people. This demographic already experiences higher rates of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other negative reproductive health outcomes which can derail educational pursuits, early career and professional opportunities, and other important milestones.<sup>47</sup> Young people of color, low-income people, and those in the LGBTQ community face especially significant barriers to accessing health care services due to cost barriers and issues around stigma and discrimination. As a result, these groups experience worse reproductive health outcomes.<sup>48</sup> Here are a few ways we can protect young people's access to reproductive health.

- **Protect and expand the ACA and Medicaid:** The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was groundbreaking in that it enshrined coverage of young people under their parents' plans until the age of 26, ensuring access to life-saving services like contraceptive care, pregnancy-related care, and screenings for sexually transmitted infections.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Medicaid has been a vital insurance program for young people, particularly in expansion states that have enrolled individuals whose incomes were up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the Administration has been determined to take away these insurance protections for young people by, among other things, repealing the ACA's contraceptive coverage mandate, proposing an



abortion coverage ban on ACA-related private insurance, and imposing work requirements for Medicaid enrollees.

- **Invest in pregnancy prevention programs:** The Trump administration has attempted to undermine the integrity and efficacy of key grant programs important to young people, including the Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) Program. The TPP Program funds dozens of evidence-based pregnancy prevention programs across the country that have contributed to record-low teen pregnancy rates.<sup>51</sup> Last year, the Department of Health and Human Services announced that it would redirect funding to TPP programs that promote abstinence-only education, an approach that has been proven to be ineffective at reducing teen pregnancy rates.
- **No gag rule:** The Trump administration issued a rule—a “domestic gag rule”—that prohibits Title X family planning grantees from providing the full range of pregnancy-related options, including abortion care, to their patients.<sup>52</sup> The rule is particularly harmful to young people as it requires “family participation,” or the involvement of parents or guardians in a young person’s decision to obtain family planning services. Given the likely chilling effect this will have on a young person’s decision to pursue Title X services, as they may no longer trust the confidentiality and safety of the care they are receiving, this rule could cause countless young people to forgo care and be at risk of unintended pregnancies and STIs. Without Title X funding, it has been reported that the unintended pregnancy rate for women ages 15 to 19 would be 44 percent higher.<sup>53</sup>

To ensure the protection of young people’s reproductive rights and their ability to pursue educational and professional aspirations, the 116th Congress must act now. It can do this by preserving and strengthening the ACA, and the law’s associated benefits, while reversing the Administration’s efforts to undermine Medicaid. The 116th Congress, with its record number of women members, can also cement women’s rights by supporting

comprehensive legislation that ensures protections for abortion access, contraceptive services, and pregnancy prevention programs. Congress can also build off of the gains made at the state level to prohibit political interference in medical decision-making, as Massachusetts successfully did with the Protecting Access to Confidential Health Care (PATCH) Act.<sup>54</sup> Legislative gains made in these areas will help ensure that young people are able to control their reproductive health, pursue their professional and educational aspirations, and live whole and healthy lives.

# College Affordability and Student Debt

Skyrocketing higher education costs and the resulting student debt crisis continue to ravage the economic lives of Americans of all ages, though Millennials are hit particularly hard as the most educated cohort in American history.<sup>55</sup> Racial wealth gaps manifest themselves for students seeking a degree,<sup>56</sup> with young people of color carrying disproportionate levels of debt.<sup>57</sup> In total, more than 44 million Americans are shouldering \$1.5 trillion in outstanding student loans, with people under the age of 35 holding almost half of that debt.<sup>58</sup>

In recent years, legislators at both the state and federal level have begun to recognize the importance of addressing the burden student debt puts on their constituents and how that burden limits financial decisions, from career paths, to buying homes, to starting families. In addressing the crisis, legislators have a narrow window to take advantage of a powerful opportunity to band Millennials and Generation Z together. When formulating solutions, policymakers must correct the problems of both current and future borrowers. By singularly addressing either the cost of college, or the debt burdens Americans are carrying, legislators risk splitting a powerful and loud base with very real and life-impacting reasons to advocate for change. With a chance for a well overdue reauthorization of the Higher Education Act this spring, legislators have an opportunity to support a variety of solutions.

- **Free or debt-free college:** All students, regardless of their background, should be able to afford a postsecondary education

into debt. The term “debt-free” college includes not just tuition but also associated expenses such as books, housing, transportation, and food. There are several existing models of “free” or “debt-free” college around the country, including free community college programs.<sup>59</sup> More ambitious and comprehensive proposals can be found in CAP’s “Beyond Tuition,” report which emphasizes equity.<sup>60</sup> Under this proposal, students whose families earn below 150 percent of the federal poverty level—about \$38,000 per year for a family of four—would have their tuition and fees covered.

- **Implement solutions to help borrowers:** Congress could improve conditions for borrowers in a variety of ways. In considering solutions, it’s important to remember that often those struggling most with repayment are low-balance<sup>61</sup> and low-income borrowers.<sup>62</sup> A broad group of individuals would benefit from lowering monthly payments through improved and generous Income Driven Repayment (IDR) plans, upping accessibility to student debt forgiveness available through IDR, pressing the Department of Education to process discharges to borrowers now eligible via Public Service Loan Forgiveness, and allowing borrowers to refinance their student loans in the same way they could a mortgage.<sup>63</sup>
- **Tackle bad actors profiting off of borrowers:** Regulatory rollbacks under the DeVos Department of Education mean that it’s more crucial than ever to protect student loan borrowers from companies looking to rake in taxpayer dollars and borrower earnings. Measures that would protect borrowers include: getting private collection agencies out of the federal student loan space,<sup>64</sup> increasing external oversight and consumer input into the Department of Education’s Federal Student Aid office,<sup>65</sup> and allowing the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to execute its mission to protect borrowers without interference from Trump administration appointees.<sup>66</sup> Borrowers should also be able to expect consistently high levels of service, no matter who their servicer is, which Congress could accomplish by

implementing stricter loan servicing standards. It is worth noting that several states have introduced servicer accountability legislation, which could serve as a model, and would be unnecessary if the federal government implemented solutions on a national level.<sup>67</sup>

- **For-profit college accountability:** Under the current administration's deregulatory agenda, students targeted by low-quality and scam schools have suffered.<sup>68</sup> To keep taxpayer dollars assisting students' attendance at high-quality higher education institutions and protect borrowers from taking on high debt burdens that do not result in better-paying jobs, Congress must also address the problem of for-profit and predatory colleges.<sup>69</sup> Key solutions here include stopping Secretary Betsy DeVos' rewrites and rollbacks of existing federal rules. Congress can weigh in on, and call attention to, relief for cheated borrowers through the Obama-era Borrower Defense rule.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, to ensure quality and accountability at postsecondary institutions, Congress can demand the Department enforce the Gainful Employment rule,<sup>71</sup> the 90/10 rule,<sup>72</sup> and that accreditors use cohort default rates in their assessments.<sup>73</sup>

# Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion

One of the identifying characteristics of the Millennial generation is its diversity. 2015 Census data revealed that Asians, Hispanics, and multiracial identifying people, are among the fastest growing populations in the U.S.<sup>74</sup> Keeping with this trend, Generation Z has already surpassed Millennial diversity statistics as of 2018.<sup>75</sup> This cohort of young adults and adolescents is more educated, and more exposed to a broad range of individuals with different experiences and beliefs compared to generations before them. For this reason, it is crucial that inclusivity be an essential component of all policy recommendations going forward. Centering voices of various racial backgrounds, disabilities, sexual orientations, and faiths is key to tapping into the spirit of younger generations.

## LGBTQ Rights

LGBTQ people lack comprehensive and explicit federal protections from discrimination and face high rates of discrimination.<sup>76</sup> Over eight percent of Millennials identify as LGBTQ, more than double the rate of Generation X or Baby Boomers.<sup>77</sup> People from Generation Z are even less likely than Millennials to identify as exclusively heterosexual.<sup>78</sup> While LGBTQ young people today feel more comfortable being out, they still face high rates of discrimination, harassment, and bullying. The 116th Congress should fight anti-LGBTQ bullying, discrimination, and mistreatment, by passing explicit protections.

- **Prohibit discrimination in all areas of life:** LGBTQ youth face pervasive discrimination, yet they lack explicit protections in most states. The bullying and discrimination LGBTQ students face forces them to focus on their basic safety rather than learning, sometimes pushing them to avoid school entirely.<sup>79</sup> LGBTQ young people also face disproportionate discipline at school and interactions with the juvenile justice system. Congress should enact comprehensive nondiscrimination protections that protect LGBTQ youth from discrimination in all areas of their life, including employment, school, housing, credit, public accommodations, and interactions with police.
- **Increase and improve assistance for runaway and homeless youth and survivors of violence:** LGBTQ youth and young adults face more than twice the rate of homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth and are more likely to face sexual abuse and engage in survival sex while experiencing homelessness.<sup>80</sup> Despite a great need for supportive services, LGBTQ young people experiencing homelessness can face discrimination when they seek help. LGBTQ youth also experience higher rates of sexual assault and intimate partner violence.<sup>81</sup> Including explicit nondiscrimination protections in service provision is necessary to ensure LGBTQ young people experiencing homelessness and LGBTQ survivors of violence are able to access services without facing discrimination.
- **End conversion therapy:** Too many LGBTQ youth across the country are forced to undergo conversion therapy, a harmful and widely discredited practice that seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. 15 states and D.C. have now banned conversion therapy for minors, and that number is growing.<sup>82</sup> However, a young person's safety shouldn't depend on their zip code. Banning conversion therapy for minors is important to protect all LGBTQ youth from the harmful practice.

## Disability Rights

According to the CDC, one in four people have a disability. Despite comprising one of the largest minorities in the U.S., young people with disabilities continue to face structural barriers which limit their access to education, skills development, financial independence and comprehensive healthcare. According to the Guideposts for Success, young people with disabilities are twice as likely to not complete high school, half as likely to go to college, and four times as likely to be adjudicated.<sup>83</sup> As of 2017, only 18.7 percent of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 65.7 percent of people without disabilities, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>84</sup> Twenty one percent of youth who live in poverty also have a mental health disability.<sup>85</sup> The 116th Congress must remove these barriers which play a major role in the disproportionately high rates of poverty experienced by youth with disabilities.

- **Health care:** Access to comprehensive health care that does not discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions continues to be one of the most important issues facing young people with disabilities. Furthermore, disabled youth need the right to access long-term supports and services in the comfort of their own home, not nursing homes and institutions. Mental health services and supports must be included as essential health benefits and covered to the same extent as other health services.
- **End subminimum wage and segregated employment:** In recent years, over 400,000 people with disabilities were employed in segregated settings, making an average of \$2.15 per hour. This cannot be the expectation for future generations of disabled youth. The “14(c) Certificate Program,” which supports these programs, must end, and a gradual transition for individuals currently in the system into competitive integrated employment is needed.<sup>86</sup>
- **End asset limits:** People with disabilities who receive supports



and services are prohibited from saving money or accruing assets. Individuals that have more than \$2,000 saved in their bank account risk losing Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income.<sup>87</sup> This forces disabled people to live at a standard of poverty and serves as a disincentive for individuals to go to college and take advantage of internships or other opportunities for career pipelines. Asset-limit reform is necessary to allow people with disabilities to save money and build the resources they need to get ahead.

## Racial Justice

For centuries, structural racism has produced and maintained stark racial disparities in the experiences and outcomes of America's youth. The election of Donald Trump has only exacerbated this problem by undercutting the health, freedom, and prosperity of people of color. In an increasingly diverse country, access to the American dream should not depend on the color of one's skin. The 116th Congress must devote energy and resources towards dismantling barriers to opportunity, making amends for past and present racial injustices, and empowering Millennials and post-Millennials of color to live up to their full potential.

- **Race and economic opportunity:** Today, white households have ten times more wealth than black households and eight times more wealth than Hispanic households.<sup>88</sup> The inability of black families to have similar wealth as their white counterparts places additional obstacles of upward economic mobility for youth of color.<sup>89</sup> In 99 percent of neighborhoods, black and Native American youth will grow up to earn less than their white neighbors, regardless of family characters or ability.<sup>90</sup> When applying for jobs and being paid or promoted, half of all African Americans, 1 in 3 Native Americans and Latinos, and a quarter of Asian Americans report experiencing discrimination.<sup>91</sup> The inability to obtain jobs, receive fair and equitable wages, and experience employment free from discrimination make

it extremely hard to build wealth. Without targeted and intentional government intervention, these disparities will continue. As Congress works to expand job opportunities and increase wages for America's youth, it must reflect and focus on ongoing harms caused by structural racism.

- **Civil rights protections:** Core civil rights protections continue to be under attack. At the federal and state level, we see attacks on voting rights, common sense criminal justice reforms, and protections against housing discrimination. Multiple states have passed voter ID laws and discriminatory voter purge policies, which systematically exclude people of color, young people, and Americans with disabilities from exercising their fundamental right to vote.<sup>92</sup> Black Millennials and post-Millennials are also at greater risk of contact with the criminal justice system than any previous generation.<sup>93</sup> In fact, 1 in 4 black Millennials had an incarcerated loved one before turning 18-years-old. For those born in the early 1990s, the rate is almost 1 in 3. Furthermore, half of African Americans across the United States, along with more than 1 in 4 Latinos and Native Americans, report that they were treated unfairly by police because of their race or ethnicity.<sup>94</sup> In 2017, 45 percent of African Americans, 31 percent of Latinos, 25 percent of Asian Americans, and 17 percent of Native Americans reported that they experienced discrimination when trying to rent or buy housing. Congress must address these critical issues with a deep understanding of the entrenched racial bias that characterizes America's electoral and justice systems.

## Faith

Across American history, faith and activism have been keenly intertwined, and youth activists today are making no exceptions.<sup>95</sup> The gun violence prevention movement, largely organized by young people directly impacted

by gun violence has also been fueled by support from young people of faith. Roughly 3,000 members of the Union for Reform Judaism marched at March for Our Lives, including youth group members of NFTY, the Reform Jewish youth movement. A recent Pew research study indicates that Millennials identify less with a specific religious tradition than previous generations, however, 67 percent of Millennials say that religion is “important” in their lives.<sup>96</sup>

Millennials are also unique in that they are the most religiously diverse generation of adults, and make up approximately half of religious minority groups like Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Young people also embrace the religious diversity in their midst. Another recent study of over 7,000 college students indicates that 85 percent believe it is “important” or “very important” for their campuses to “provide a welcoming environment for people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives.”<sup>97</sup>

- **Religious freedom:** The 116th Congress should similarly reflect this welcoming attitude toward religious diversity, rejecting any attempts to restrict or manipulate constitutional protections of religious freedom.<sup>98</sup>

# Immediate Recommendations

With the recent increase in youth voter turnout and younger generations becoming the largest voting bloc in the country, now is the time to ensure young people are centered in Congress' proposed policies and legislation. To help tap into this youth power, Generation Progress and the Center for American Progress recommend the following ten priorities for the new Congress:

1. **Protect the right to vote:** Ensure fair access to the democratic process through Automatic Voter Registration (AVR), pre-registration, and Election Day Registration.
2. **Implement common-sense gun laws:** Address the U.S. gun violence epidemic by investing in research and passing legislation that enforces universal background checks, increases funding for nationwide gun violence prevention and intervention programs, bans assault weapons and high capacity magazines, enables the Centers for Disease Control to research gun violence as a public health issue, disarms all domestic abusers, and makes ERPOs available in every state.
3. **Enact bold criminal justice reforms to curb mass incarceration:** Rethink national policies that exacerbate the mass incarceration problem in the U.S. by making sure marijuana legislation includes strong provisions that clear marijuana criminal records and ensure meaningful reinvestment in communities of color, reforming the pretrial system including the removal of barriers to bail payments, improving the timeliness and quality of national data collection, and passing legislation to automatically expunge certain federal offenses from criminal records.

4. **Protect DACA recipients and TPS holders:** Provide permanent protections to young immigrants by passing legislation that puts Dreamers and TPS holders on a pathway to citizenship.
5. **Tackle climate change through clean energy proposals and infrastructure investment:** Heed the warnings from climate scientists on the dangers of inaction on climate by passing bold legislation that takes on carbon emissions and invests in clean energy and infrastructure.
6. **Shore up protections and access to reproductive health and family planning services:** Center the needs of young people and their reproductive health by protecting and expanding the ACA and Medicaid, investing in pregnancy prevention programs, and stopping the Trump administration's domestic gag rule.
7. **Address the student debt crisis:** To curb the mounting student debt crisis, Congress must pass legislation that ensures young people have access to free or debt-free college, implement solutions to help borrowers, tackle bad actors profiting off of borrowers, and hold for-profit colleges accountable for cheating student borrowers.
8. **Provide comprehensive federal protections for the LGBTQ community:** Congress should fight anti-LGBTQ bullying, discrimination, and mistreatment, by passing explicit protections to end discrimination in all areas of life, increase and improve assistance for runaway and homeless youth and survivors of violence, and end conversion therapy.
9. **Remove structural barriers faced by young people with disabilities:** In order to remove barriers faced by disabled youth, Congress must provide access to comprehensive care that does not discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions and provides the right to access long-term supports and services, ends subminimum wage and

segregated employment, and eradicate asset limits for people with disabilities.

10. **Dismantle barriers to opportunity for young people of color and young people of all faiths:** The 116th Congress should invest in young people of color by creating racial and economic opportunities and providing civil rights protections. They should similarly invest in young people of faith with welcoming attitudes toward religious diversity and rejecting any attempts to restrict or manipulate constitutional protections of religious freedom.

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