

ever statutory right to vote in Federal elections, therefore allowing Americans to enforce that right by challenging in court any policy that restricts ballot access.

This legislation takes an enshrined right and empowers the people with the tools to defend it. This way, States attempting to restrict voting access will have to meet a high bar to justify any policy that makes it harder for U.S. citizens to participate in Federal elections.

Restricting the ability of Americans to freely and fairly cast their ballots threatens the very core of our Nation's founding democratic principles.

As Americans deal with the ongoing effects of COVID-19 and prepare for elections in the coming months and years, we should be removing—not adding—unnecessary barriers to voting.

While efforts to pass voting rights legislation have been stymied by Senate Republicans, you can be assured that I will continue to stand ready and willing to work with my colleagues in Congress to defend Americans' right to vote, end partisan gerrymandering, and prevent voter suppression.

The vote today will allow us to begin a much-needed debate on the topic of voting rights. I ask my Republican colleagues to come to the table and join us in this conversation about how we can protect our elections and safeguard American democracy.

I urge all my colleagues to support these important bills that would protect and advance voting rights in our country.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 2842

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, our Armed Forces have been asked to work miracles over the last 18 months, and they have performed. During a global pandemic, in the face of natural disasters, facing dangerous missions, our men and women in uniform have risen dutifully, faithfully to the challenge. Many of our servicemembers have contracted—and then recovered from—COVID-19 over the last 18 months. Now these same heroes are being placed in a corner by this administration.

President Biden's COVID-19 vaccine requirement for the Armed Forces does not grant our soldiers, sailors, and marines the respect they deserve, and it could pose a challenge to recruitment and even to military readiness.

This mandate, tied with President Biden's more sweeping general vaccine mandate, has put millions of Americans in difficult positions. In most cases, these are just everyday Americans. They are mothers and fathers,

husbands and wives just trying to put food on the table during what has, for many, been a difficult time.

These still unwritten but very much efficacious mandates are forcing millions of our fellow citizens into a sort of second-class, unemployable status, placing countless of our neighbors on the economic and social fringes of our society.

I have heard from almost 300 Utahans in recent days who were worried about losing their jobs due to the mandates. Some of these individuals are heroic members of our military. These servicemembers were rightly praised for serving during a pandemic and for dangerous missions, but now are being forced out, possibly with limited or no retirement benefits because of the President's mandate.

Let me just share with you a few of their stories. One soldier who reached out to me recently has served for 10 years in the military. He never received a single reprimand, whether written or verbal. He honorably and proudly served his Nation. He has been informed, despite his years of successful Active-Duty service, that he will not receive an honorable discharge if he doesn't comply with the vaccine requirement. Accordingly, he asked to resign from the military. His commanders made clear that he would be barred from resignation. Then he sought a personal religious exemption. He was summarily told that his exemption request would be denied.

Of his situation, he said:

To be backed into a corner with two very bad options is both disheartening and sad, especially with what I have sacrificed and what my family has sacrificed on behalf of the military.

Another soldier told me his story. He has been in the Army for 18 years. All along, he was planning on retiring upon reaching two decades of service. He is about 18 months shy of reaching that point—just 18 months from that retirement point that he has been working toward for nearly two decades. Now, because of the vaccine mandate, he is at risk of losing his benefits and not receiving an honorable discharge.

Regarding his situation, he said:

This will cause a substantial loss in pay and quality of life for myself and a large number of others I know.

A third soldier reached out to my office in a similar retirement situation. This soldier has children who experienced complications with receiving the vaccine. The soldier also has a child with significant learning disabilities, whom he is worried about providing for.

He said:

This really could be a life-changing event for my family, and I feel strongly enough about it that I will risk all my benefits not to take [the vaccine]. I just wish I had a choice.

Now, these stories just barely scratch the surface of the hundreds of stories that I have heard from people across my State, including many who are

servicemembers. These people, like millions of other Americans, deserve a better option. They have earned that. That is why, today, I am asking that the Senate pass my Respecting our Servicemembers Act. This bill would simply prohibit the Secretary of Defense from requiring COVID-19 vaccination for our military. I am grateful to my colleagues Senators BRAUN and TUBERVILLE for joining me as cosponsors.

This is now the seventh time I have come to the Senate floor, asking that the Federal Government take a more temperate, reasoned approach. As I have said each time before, I am not anti-vaccine. In fact, I believe the development of the COVID-19 vaccine is a miracle. I have been vaccinated, and I have encouraged every member of my family to be vaccinated, and they have done so. I think the vaccine is a good thing. These mandates are simply the wrong way of getting it done.

Look, when we look at the employer vaccine mandate generally, the President doesn't have the authority. In fact, the Federal Government doesn't have that authority. This is not a power that belongs to the Federal Government to begin with. You know, even if it did, we haven't authorized the President to do this unilaterally. Even if we had or even if we were now considering a measure that would give him that authority, it is worth noting here that there are so many other better, more reasoned ways to encourage vaccination.

That is why I am here today, and that is why I will be back for as long as it takes to address these mandates, which are causing pain and suffering to hard-working moms and dads who don't want to have to be making a gut-wrenching choice between, on the one hand, receiving medical treatment that they don't want, whether for religious reasons or a health-related reason related to what their doctors have advised them or some other compelling personal reason or otherwise—they shouldn't have to choose between receiving medical treatment they don't want and forfeiting their ability to put bread on the table for their children. It is un-American, it is unfair, and it is immoral.

So, Mr. President, as if in legislative session, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Armed Services be discharged from further consideration of S. 2842 and that the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration. I further ask unanimous consent that the bill be considered read a third time and passed and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. REED. Mr. President, in reserving my right to object, on August 24, the Secretary of Defense determined that the mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 was necessary to

protect the force and defend the American people.

Vaccination is not mandatory for any servicemember who has a legitimate medical or religious reason for not being vaccinated.

Mandatory vaccinations are limited to only FDA-approved vaccines. All FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccines have been determined to be safe and effective.

According to press reports, as of October 4, Active-Duty vaccination rates are as follows: the Army, 81 percent; the Navy, 90 percent; the Air Force, 80.9 percent; and the Marine Corps, 76.5 percent.

Mandatory vaccination is not a new issue for military personnel. Mandatory vaccinations for critical illnesses are mission critical, and requiring vaccination is almost as old as the military itself. I can personally verify that point. Indeed, servicemembers are currently required to get 17 different vaccinations when they enter the military or before deploying overseas, including for measles, mumps, diphtheria, hepatitis, smallpox, and the flu.

We need a healthy and ready force. We saw what happened when Navy ships were contaminated with COVID. They weren't ready to deploy. They couldn't deploy. They were tied up. Their effectiveness and ability to defend the country were marginalized, to say the least. I think this is absolutely incongruent with the practice and mission of the military.

One other thing I would say is that one of the most fundamental ethics of the military is that every soldier, sailor, marine, airman, and guardian is prepared to sacrifice for their fellow servicemember, and the idea that one would put their own personal feelings ahead of the potential for contaminating or sickening another servicemember and affecting the unit is something that I don't think squares with the ethic of the U.S. military or the effectiveness of the force.

I agree with the Secretary of Defense; therefore, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Colorado.

Mr. BENNET. Thank you, Mr. President. I would ask the quorum call be vitiated.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is not in a quorum call.

Mr. BENNET. For once, the Senate is not in a quorum call. It is amazing. We are having an actual debate. I can't believe it. It has been so long since that has been true.

FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I am here to talk about voting rights today, and I actually am delighted that you are in the Chair, my colleague from Colorado, because over many years you have had so much to do with the fact that Colorado has the second-highest turnout of any State in the country—76 percent—because of what we have done,

Republicans and Democrats and unaffiliated voters working together, to make sure that Coloradans can cast their ballots.

I am tired, as I am sure you are, of hearing our colleague from Minnesota come down here, Senator KLOBUCHAR, and say that Minnesota is No. 1 in voting, which they are. They have more than 76 percent of the people that vote, but I think we will catch them, and maybe we will catch them this year.

But the reason why we have such a high turnout is because of things that we have put in place working in a bipartisan way. And when the Presiding Officer was the Governor of Colorado, you know, that was when, really, we moved to the mail-in ballot system that we have, completely fraud free and a delight, especially for people living in rural areas, where it is hard to get to the ballot box sometimes.

And so thank you for helping create a model for the country as we debate this bill in front of us. In fact, much of what this bill does—I will get to the bill in a minute—is reflective of the work that we have done in Colorado.

Mr. President, you came here during a difficult time, I would say, for our democracy. This has been, in many ways, a near-death experience for the U.S. democracy. There are countries all over the world that are totalitarian societies who are counting on our country to fail. They tell us at the negotiating table every time we sit down with them that they think we are going to fail; that democracy isn't up to the challenges of the 21st century; that it doesn't move fast enough. This place doesn't move at all many weeks and could give a person reason to wonder whether or not we are going to make it work.

But in this year, we had a particularly savage experience on January 6, when the Capitol was invaded by our own citizens, and we were escorted off the floor of the Senate, taken to a secure facility, where I watched and the Presiding Officer watched what everybody in America saw, what everybody in the world saw, which were thousands of people streaming into this Capitol to try to stop the counting of the vote at the urging of then-President Trump.

And, fortunately, because there were enough people in this body who wanted to confirm the vote, on January 20, we actually had a peaceful transfer of power, and Joe Biden became the President of the United States.

Most countries that have a January 6 never survive to January 20, you know. And when I was a kid, it was common to see these kinds of things happen in other capitals around the world, places like Tehran. You never would have imagined it would happen here in Washington, DC.

And now it has happened here in Washington, DC. But the big difference is that because more people turned out to vote than at any time in our country's history, we had that peaceful transfer of power.

And now the question for all of us, I think, as Americans, is, What are we going to do with the gift that our fellow citizens have given us by turning out to vote in the midst of a pandemic in record number? What are we going to do with that gift they have given to us—a gift of democracy, I would say, a new lease on life.

And I think we have got a moral obligation to them and to our Nation's children and, frankly, to humanity to make sure that this democracy actually works for the American people and not for the special interests that have worked so hard to corrupt it.

And there are so many ways before January 6 that our democracy was being attacked: partisan gerrymandering all over the country to allow politicians to pick their voters rather than have voters pick their politicians. That is an incredibly undemocratic thing for us to be doing across the country; the special interests that lobby this place who are basically unregulated by any campaign finance laws; the effect of Citizens United, which was the Supreme Court's decision that opened the floodgates of billionaires funding American elections instead of people funding American elections; and now, perhaps most egregiously, because it is so strategic and it is so purposeful, the attack on the vote all over the United States of America.

I find it hard to believe. I am 54 years—56. That is the saddest story I have ever told. I am 56 years old, Mr. President. As you know, I went to college in the 1980s, you know, and now I am seeing laws passed that I read about in the 1980s that passed in the 1960s to try to deny people the right to vote all over the country, to make it harder to vote.

Just this year, 19 States have passed 33 laws undermining democracy; laws to make it harder to vote early or vote by mail, two things we treasure in the State of Colorado; laws to slash the number of drop boxes or put them in really inconvenient places so people can't vote, as I do every single election with a drop box just a few blocks from my house. It takes me 30 seconds to vote, completely fraud free. Everyone in America should have the benefit of that.

We have got a law that made it a crime in Georgia to give people water while they are waiting in line to vote.

So I know there is a tendency around this place sometimes to just think that our democracy, just because it has always been here, that it is always going to be around, to assume that we can coast on the blood and the sweat and the tears of Americans who came before us, who fought generation after generation after generation to make this country more democratic, more fair, and more free. This is not a time for coasting. This is a time for us to deal with the profound threat that is stealing the right of Americans all over this country to vote, to have their