

2022 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Sasha Lann (Brattleboro Union High School, Sophomore)
Voting Rights

Second Place

Eva Frazier (Champlain Valley Union High School, Senior)
Reproductive Rights

Third Place

Samuel Leggett (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)
Universal School Meals

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Jackson Bennett (Vergennes Union High School, Junior)

Penelope Derosset (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Jocelyn Dunn (Essex High School, Junior)

Samantha Haselman (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax, Senior)

Anna Pringle (Essex High School, Junior)

Isabelle Tupper (Brattleboro Union High School, Sophomore)

Luna Wood (Champlain Valley Union High School, Senior)

Winner
Sasha Lann (Brattleboro Union High School, Sophomore)

Citizens' rights to vote may be the most fundamental aspect of our democracy, but there is a growing effort to limit it. Increasing voter suppression and restrictive voting laws is an issue that must be addressed, as it has grown from a gradual build to a rush of constant new legislation that could do permanent damage if ignored. Voter suppression is one of the United States' biggest threats to democracy, and the way to address it may be to enact legislation that ensures all Americans have equal access to voting and have their votes counted.

Recently, the United States has seen a massive uptick in legislation restricting voting in large sections of the country. In 2021 alone, 99 bills were introduced in 31 states to restrict voting. 34 were passed into law. The laws strengthen ID requirements, limit drop boxes and mail voting, increase opportunities for voter purges, and introduce criminal penalties for election officers who help voters return mail ballots. These laws excessively target BIPOC communities. Young voters are also made vulnerable by this legislation. This attack on our voting system, though disproportionately affecting communities of color, will harm the entire country and make us vulnerable to authoritarianism and the collapse of our democracy altogether.

Enacting effective voting rights legislation can be a lengthy and difficult process. There are already bills in progress that have passed the House, but are being blocked by Republicans via the filibuster. As soon as the filibuster can be changed, we can continue to make progress. In the meantime, the best solution may be to do what we can to prevent lawmakers from signing more restrictive legislation into law. Part of this solution relies on companies ending support and campaign contributions for lawmakers responsible for this legislation. Companies and businesses could play an essential role in standing up to these efforts. However, community and business support will not be enough to prevent suppressive legislation for long.

There are several solutions that could stop the onslaught of voter restriction laws long term, starting with federal legislation to protect voting rights and remove obstacles for those facing difficulty casting votes. There should be laws to enforce automatic registration, restore voter rights for former prisoners, and increase resources for election boards to ensure security. Election Day could also be made a holiday so citizens have free time to vote, and each state should set up independent redistricting commissions to avoid gerrymandering. If used together, these methods will greatly improve access to voting.

Voter suppression and restrictive voting laws are threatening the integrity of our democracy, and we can counteract them by passing legislation that protects citizens' say in the course of the country through their votes. If nothing is done, we may see the fall of our democracy as we know it. These are the steps needed to be taken to preserve this cornerstone of our country.

Second Place

Eva Frazier (Champlain Valley Union High School, Senior)

In the past few months, millions of people have lost rights over their bodies, their health, and their futures. As countless states across the country move to almost totally limit abortion, I fear for all people who may become pregnant in these affected areas. I fear for those without money to travel to obtain a safe abortion, for those expectant mothers experiencing a medical condition forced to choose between their life or their child's, and for the youth without proper education, suddenly finding themselves with no choice over their lives.

Two things happen when politicians ban or block abortions: unsafe abortions or children being born to people who can't take care of them. Many will die, and it is almost always poor, BIPOC, and marginalized people. The state of reproductive rights in this country is an aggressive violation of human rights.

To combat the alarming issues affecting reproductive rights locally, nationally, and internationally, I would propose a three-tiered approach to provide reproductive services to all who need them. First, at the state level, Vermont needs to amend our state Constitution, and protect the right to abortion, without barrier, forever. If Vermont state legislators succeed in passing this amendment, currently known as Prop 5, Vermont will become the first state to protect the right to reproductive health care access. In addition to legally protecting the right to abortion, Vermont state legislators must increase the budget for health care centers that perform abortions.

Nationally, Congress must pass two pieces of legislation. First, Congress must repeal the Hyde Amendment. As the ACLU states, "Passed by Congress in 1976, the Hyde Amendment excludes abortion from the comprehensive health care services provided to low-income people by the Federal Government through Medicaid." Low-income people are the least likely to have transportation and funds to obtain an abortion, and the Hyde amendment keeps low income people from having equal access to determine their futures.

Reproductive rights are not only at stake nationally, but internationally. Currently, the U.S. will not fund any international health care centers that provide abortions, which often then prohibits them from providing lifesaving treatments for malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other medical care. This draconian policy, known as the Global Gag Rule, was first introduced by President Reagan, and recently reinstated by President Trump. U.S. congressional representatives have a duty to pass legislation, known as the Global HER Act, that would overturn the Global Gag Rule, and cement the U.S. as a country that provides necessary foreign aid, instead of risking millions of lives.

As people turn to illegal abortions, it is crucial that lawmakers work to protect their citizens by passing federal law and upholding the International Human Rights declaration, giving humans freedom over their bodies and health care choices.

Third Place
Samuel Leggett (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Throughout history, America has been plagued with the complex issue of food insecurity. Moreover, the children of our nation – the ambassadors to our future – seem to experience it more severely. According to Feeding America, one in every eight adults currently faces hunger, and the same can be said for one in six children. Furthermore, hunger in our youth has only festered with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Compared to 10 million previously, the number of food-insecure children in America has increased to approximately 12 million. Notwithstanding our nation's immense prosperity and value for education, our students experience inaccessibility to affordable, nutritious food, and are seldom provided with the assistance they need.

Though the discussion of universal free meals has long existed, the pandemic proved to be the catalyst for its execution. Through action on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, our government will provide free breakfast and lunch to schools nationwide throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Students now have the opportunity to be created equal in their education and wellbeing. Recent studies from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have concluded that the initiative has even improved both student behavior and performance. Though abundant are the benefits of this Covid-mitigation strategy, the implementation of universal school meals is still seen as a temporary measure. Even long after these challenging times, however, the pandemic's repercussions will persist, if not worsen, if not addressed. Though they may initially seem like a significant financial hurdle, universal school meals are a progressive, bipartisan, and necessary first effort in resolving the issue of food insecurity.

One significant advantage to implementing universal free meals is that it would permanently eliminate the nation's preexisting free and reduced lunch system – an inequitable, stigma-inducing program designed to assist students facing hunger. With strict eligibility requirements, free and reduced meals were rarely provided to all those who needed them, and the income-based aid system couldn't accurately account for criteria-meeting households that were nevertheless food insecure for other reasons. Additionally, applications for the program were not required, which excluded many more who potentially qualified, yet didn't apply. The program offered no way to adequately gauge whether or not one needed assistance.

Nonetheless, there remains one primary barrier to the support of universal free meals: their funding. Taxpayers fear they would wholly assume the burden of a potentially expensive feat. However, only 0.3 percent of the federal budget is currently reserved for child nutrition programs, and this cost is distributed nationwide among taxpayers. Evidently, reapportionment of the budget to increase this expenditure would neither reduce spending allocated to other departments nor increase local tax rates greatly.

We must allow ourselves to imagine an America where a free meal, despite the traditional adage, is indeed possible; an America that ensures our youth's prosperity, during and following times of crisis. We must consider the future, and pass sustainable, logical legislation; legislation providing every student with the baseline liberty of a satisfied stomach in their daily pursuit of knowledge.

Finalists
(in alphabetical order)

Jackson Bennett (Vergennes Union High School, Junior)

We have all seen the images; sea turtles with straws jammed in their noses, fish entrapped within plastic six-pack yokes, even whales with bellies full of plastic trash. There is no doubt that our plastic pollution is not just a problem, it is a calamity. According to USA Today, "Different kinds of plastic take anywhere between 400 and 1,000 years to degrade in a landfill... So much plastic is thrown away every year that it's enough to circle the Earth four times." That means at least 6.3 billion metric tons of plastic waste is being added by the day. Something must be done, but what? I believe that there should be a national ban on plastic, or some other government-controlled incentive to switch to plastic alternatives.

There are many existing plastic alternatives already available, but extensive use of and investment in them has not yet been seen. On Eartheasy, a site that lists plastic alternatives, they note that, "finding alternatives to common items like plastic bottles and plastic packaging is becoming increasingly easier — and not a moment too soon for our plastic-choked planet." Examples of these plastic alternatives include, but are not limited to, bamboo, seaweed, wood, cloth for bags, and for multi-use but non-biodegradable substances, glass and stainless steel for replacing one-use items. The possibilities are limitless on what ways we can replace plastic, and our technology and innovation provide us with new, sustainable options, but how do we convince the world to use these alternatives?

If we really want to make progress against our plastic pandemonium, we cannot leave it up to individual people to consider plastic alternatives. This is a collective issue we need to address first as a nation, and then the world. Many solutions to this problem have been given, including taxation on plastic products, and even total bans, but no clear decision has been reached. Taxes would mean a smoother transition, and the money made off of plastic usage would go towards discouraging that same occurrence, as well as cleaning up plastic pollution. A ban would outright prevent companies and individuals from consuming plastic, which may negatively impact people's lives. I believe that a nationwide ban is the best solution. Taxation would slow the problem, and raise money for the government, but the problem would still exist. Banning plastic, though tough, would force ourselves to use alternatives, and without the incoming waste, we could focus on cleaning the ocean.

Though plastic bans would offer one solution, there is no one right answer to this issue. As long as we continue the conversation and look for ways to prevail and take action, we still have the devotion to overcome this problem. With our advances in science and technology, and the combined help of our government and fellow citizens, we can conquer our carelessness and restore this beautiful planet we inhabit to its former glory.

Penelope Derosset (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Some people in this country see no need for feminism. They say: "Men and women are equal. They have the same rights under law." But that isn't true. The only right the Constitution explicitly grants to both men and women is the right to vote. And the few rights women have, the right to abortion for one, are constantly called into question. The solution? An amendment introduced in 1923. Ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which explicitly grants all rights equally to all genders, would grant a layer of legal protection to women's rights which are so often under threat.

Laws protecting women's rights are constantly limited in their ability to protect women at all. By mid-2021, a record amount of anti-abortion legislation had already been enacted by states. Limitations requiring parental consent or banning abortion past a certain point in pregnancy make it impossible for many women to get an abortion. This may endanger the pregnant person's life. If a woman chooses to stay pregnant, she may face challenges such as pay discrimination, employers refusing to accommodate her temporary disability, or being fired. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA), the only federal law against workplace pregnancy discrimination, is consistently interpreted too narrowly to be adequate protection.

A report by the Center for Employment Equity at UMass Amherst says: "Activists and politicians have argued that by only providing a comparative, rather than absolute, right to accommodation, current laws stop short of guaranteeing protection for all pregnant workers." While women may appear to be protected by law against workplace pregnancy discrimination the truth is many are not. This leaves large numbers of people vulnerable. We must work to defend these rights or risk them disappearing.

The ERA would solve this issue by explicitly stating a constitutional position against gender discrimination. Some states have already passed equal rights amendments or have ERA-like language in their state constitutions, and using these, Connecticut and New Mexico have found laws restricting Medicaid coverage of abortion unconstitutional. With regards to pregnancy discrimination, an article by Robin Bleuweiss published by the Center for American Progress states: "The ERA could provide additional reasoning, grounded in constitutional protections, to challenge policies that effectively exclude individuals seeking pregnancy accommodations from the protection of the law, as well as to ensure equitable treatment and better conditions for pregnant workers." With the added support of constitutional protection, policies currently legal under the PDA could change and finally grant pregnant women equality.

There is no doubt adding the ERA to the Constitution would have a big impact on the essential rights of women. Implementing this solution would be simple. All the states required to ratify this amendment have. The only obstacle is the time limit. Congress has already exercised its power to extend the time limit once before, so why couldn't it do so again? To quote Alice Paul, revolutionary suffragist and the first to propose the ERA, "To me, there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality."

Jocelyn Dunn (Essex High School, Junior)

On September 1, 2021, a law banning abortion from as early as six weeks into pregnancy went into effect in Texas. The Supreme Court's failure to stop Texas Senate Bill 8 has paved the way for other states to mimic actions with similar bills that directly challenge *Roe v. Wade*. In December, the state of Mississippi asked the Supreme Court to uphold its outlaw on abortion at 15 weeks of pregnancy in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. The new reality of abortion access is a terrifyingly imperative issue, and the nation's highest court has never been so close to upholding a ban that so blatantly ignores the precedent set by *Roe v. Wade*. Political shifts that threaten to undermine *Roe v. Wade* will harm many, and simply should be unacceptable to anyone who cares about the health of women.

Since 1973, *Roe v. Wade* has provided safe, accessible abortion services to women throughout the country. The precedent set by *Roe v. Wade* affirms that it is a woman's right to have an abortion under the Fourteenth Amendment without excessive government restriction. Since the case decision, the Supreme Court has been continuously called upon to decide whether specific abortion statutes violate a woman's right to privacy. However, under the current process of examination, many abortion restrictions have been upheld and the lasting constraints of these harmful laws have opened the door to limits on the ability of women to make the personal decision of ending a pregnancy. The Supreme Court's upcoming decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* has left the future of *Roe v. Wade* at risk. According to Planned Parenthood, if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, 26 states in the country could immediately act on banning abortion through existing policies. This means that 36 million women could soon live in a state that criminalizes almost all abortion services.

With the increasingly likely overturning of *Roe v. Wade* on the horizon, Speaker Nancy Pelosi has announced that the Senate will soon hold a vote on legislation that would ensure a nationwide right to abortion. In September 2021, the House of Representatives passed the Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA). If the WHPA becomes a federal law, abortion access would be protected from not only bans but also medically unnecessary restrictions such as mandatory ultrasounds, biased counseling, and waiting periods. The WHPA would create a statutory right for health care providers to perform abortion services, and a corresponding right for their patients to receive those services, free from invasive restrictions.

The United States is on the brink of an unprecedented crisis regarding women's health. Restrictions on *Roe v. Wade* have plagued American women for decades and the right to make private decisions free from barriers is more crucial than ever to the personal dignity and autonomy of women. Eliminating health care restrictions is imperative to reproductive justice and passing the WHPA is an essential step toward safeguarding access to abortion.

Samantha Haselman (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax, Senior)

The opioid crisis and incarceration for nonviolent offenders isn't the solution for these addicts. It has an emotional, physical, and economical struggle many are facing and have been facing. People need to have compassion and understand that addiction is a disease, not a choice. Children, youth, and families are affected by opioid use. No one chooses drugs over their own children, no one chooses to steal from their loved ones, no one chooses to physically harm themselves, no one chooses to have their children taken from them.

There are many issues and concerns that exist within this topic. I can relate to this very well. In 2009 my mother developed her relationship with heroin, what most call the "devil". My mother was a kind, hardworking, funny, determined, confident woman. But since this disease has taken over her, she's not as present. Watching my mother struggling on a daily basis from being sick to running out of the home scrounging for the next "fix". It affected not only her, but it affected her family who were a witness to this. Many legal systems knew about her addiction but didn't support her nor did they provide her with the necessary resources. They focused more on removing things from her life and punishing her for something that was controlling every part of her.

There is a story that stands out to me called "Hooked". It was about a vulnerable woman who was prescribed opioids, she instantly became an addict. She was clean for a while, but relapsed multiple times. She was incarcerated, denied medical attention, and then died. Incarceration for these addicts is not helping them. Incarceration does not prepare them for sobriety when released. They need affordable treatment and support from a substance abuse counselor, and resources that will set them up for success.

There needs to be more resources and affordable treatment for individuals struggling to beat opioid addiction. I will continue to speak on this until there's a significant change our government takes far beyond what's been done. I know that Senator Sanders introduced amendments to strengthen the opioid crisis response in 2018. In addition to your amendments to the opioid bill, I believe Congress should also continue to provide additional funding like the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016. The law focuses on treating people rather than incarcerating people. Congress passed the bill giving only \$181 million in funds for opioid programs. The federal government was expecting \$920 million to help expand their treatment capacity with each state receiving money depending on the severity of the epidemic. Having funding would strengthen and support prevention, treatment, and medication access. We must continue to help those who are like my mom and we must honor these families who are waking up daily facing the nightmare of opioid addiction. This disease does not discriminate, it can be the lawyer, the doctor, the son, the daughter, the mother, and/or the father. This is all the more reason to stay focused on this and make a change.

Anna Pringle (Essex High School, Junior)

Not only is America experiencing a Covid pandemic, but America is also experiencing a loneliness epidemic. While loneliness is not diagnoseable medically or psychologically, it's associated with a variety of disorders and health issues such as depression, anxiety, and concurrently, increased suicide rates. As said in the Harvard Graduate School of Education Report, 61 percent of young adults feel serious loneliness after the pandemic.

As Covid continues, people all over the U.S. are accepting isolation. There are simple solutions to this loneliness epidemic, for example, a simple phone call or Facetime to a friend. There are also more complex solutions; an example being in the grocery store. According to Vice, the Netherlands is introducing chat registers; registers where employees will be trained to create small talk with customers who aren't in a rush. This is an effort sponsored by the Netherland government in hopes to help battle loneliness. The Netherland government also created a 24/7 loneliness hotline, both the registers and hotline are a part of the "one against loneliness" program. This is a great example of a country doing more to help people in need.

In America, mental health is not a top priority, but the impacts of mental health are astronomical. American citizens are suffering at an increasing rate because they are so isolated due to Covid. Since being lonely can be chronic, the U.S. needs to do more to help. It is not possible for one solution to single-handedly end the epidemic of loneliness; instead many solutions will have to come together. Some examples of solutions are following what the Netherlands did, creating a hotline or chat registers. Another solution is bringing awareness to this topic of how quarantining from Covid has impacted mental health. This could inspire people to call a loved one; especially the ones that live alone. Simple actions like calling a loved one could have a huge impact, this could remind a lonely person that they have people to talk to and therefore it can make someone feel less secluded. Social media is a huge part of everyone's life, putting information out there on the impact that loneliness has on people could one hundred percent make a difference.

Mental health issues are substantial in America today. There are many ways that America can do more for the loneliness crisis, creating a healthier, happier country.

Isabelle Tupper (Brattleboro Union High School, Sophomore)

As James Earl Jones reveals, "One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter". Nowadays, black Americans (nationwide) are suffering from declining mental health; one in every three black people seek assistance when struggling, and roughly 1.4 million black people are experiencing crises. As a result, suicide rates are increasing and citizens are silently suffering. Therefore, black mental health must become a priority.

In predominantly black communities, mental health is overlooked - despite its damaging impacts. Injustices are amplified by unforeseen circumstances that deplete one's quality of life. For instance, "Anxiety and depression symptoms have more than tripled since 2019, [...]" and pandemic-related homelessness and unemployment left "[...] black Americans shouldering the heaviest burden" (Fowers and Wan). Additionally, the murder of George Floyd resurfaced trauma for countless black Americans and caused mental health issues to spike five percent. Lastly, black people with mental health issues struggle to gain relief due to stigma and insufficient BIPOC medical professionals. Consequently, this urgent matter generates despondency, leading black individuals to isolate themselves.

Provisionally, this country must fulfill black individuals' needs whilst identifying propitious resources. Through survey, the public shall expunge injurious practices and distribute assets alongside governmental advisors. Parties must consider privileges of non-black people and prioritize equality. Schools must incorporate free courses - run by qualified educators - to help young people identify mental illness. Classes must be accessible and non-discriminatory, and identity must not prevent admittance. School-based clinicians will best ensure students' access to counseling; psychiatrist David Henderson, reports "about 25 percent of African Americans seek mental health care, compared to 40 percent of whites" because of impediments regarding accessibility (McLean Harvard Medical School Affiliate). Progressively, the government must accommodate affordable healthcare. Mental health must be covered by insurance and funds shall be supplied by the one percent of taxpayers. All remaining funds must go towards mental health facilities in need. Assuming that demands are met, progress will ensue.

Over time, it will be crucial to break the stigma surrounding black mental health. Once honest conversations commence, politically-correct terminology must be applied and blatant irreverence shall be condemned. Publicly, black mental health advocates shall assemble and enlighten uninformed individuals, and mental health care providers must advertise openly. Simultaneously, the mental health field must employ more people of color. BIPOC positions will be filled when salaries are livable, staff is receptive, and job openings have renowned availability. Hired professionals must have ample training, prior to or upon their employment. Finally, if employees of color exit, all businesses must hire new BIPOC staff to diversify America's perspectives.

Black mental health is a nationwide concern and all people must fight to restore it. Due to Covid losses and natural disasters, this country is facing a level of despair that only multiplies when considering mental health. In black communities, conditions are abysmal and there is dire need for improvement. If circumstances do not ameliorate, tragedy will only continue. Nevertheless, this country shall work diligently together and utilize its power to create immense change.

Luna Wood (Champlain Valley Union High School, Senior)

The single most threatening issue our world must deal with today is climate change. It is crucial that our government doesn't ignore climate change and its impacts that will affect everybody. Climate change is going to become much worse in the upcoming years and we have already started to face devastating effects. Extreme weather has destroyed communities and will not stop any time soon. Tropical storms and sea levels rising on the coasts will soon make towns and cities uninhabitable. Health risks will become worse and worse such as deaths from extreme weather storms, air pollution, water and food supply impacts. The downfall of countless communities will affect economic prosperity. Extreme weather such as hurricanes and flooding will wipe out entire communities, leaving them in poverty. Droughts have a negative impact on harvests and will increase food insecurity. As migration increases due to the adaptation of sea levels rising, resources will become more and more limited. As a nation, we cannot ignore climate change anymore.

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' Green New Deal would give our nation the step in the right direction of taking an action that will sustain our planet for generations to come. Our federal government has not allowed the passage of this deal despite its immense benefits for our country. It is stated to create 20 million jobs, which would improve our country's unemployment issue greatly.

The deal suggests using solutions such as only renewable energy will catapult our progress. We need to stop sending our nation's tax dollars to fossil fuel companies in the form of subsidies. Instead, we can invest that money into clean forms of energy such as solar. Fossil fuels are the reason why our earth has been increasingly warming up. The carbon in the air needs to be taken out of our atmosphere and put back into the ground where it came from.

We can help this process in our own state of Vermont by stopping the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on our farmland. This use of chemicals is killing habitats in our soils and causing pollution. If we adopt more organic methods of farming and take care of our soil, the crops, plants and organisms living in the soil can help sequester carbon from the air. Another simple solution to drawing carbon from the air is planting many, many trees. Other countries have already implemented this solution and there is no reason why we can't as well.

Yes, applying these solutions will take time, money, and resources. But the positive outcomes from this deal are necessary and worth it. This should be the main focus of our government right now because it is a global emergency and soon it will be too late.