Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We write to you to express our concern regarding the possible disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic's May 15 election. We urge the State Department to request clarity from the Dominican government regarding the alarmingly low numbers of new voter registrations.

According to figures released by the Junta Central Electorale (JCE- Central Electoral Board), voter registration in the Dominican Republic has grown by only 4 percent for 2016, whereas typical annual growth is 12-16 percent. Civil society organizations in the Dominican Republic have reported that many Dominicans of Haitian descent who are eligible to vote have not received voter registration documents, and they believe that the drop in the voter registration numbers is due to systematic voter suppression targeting Dominicans of Haitian descent.
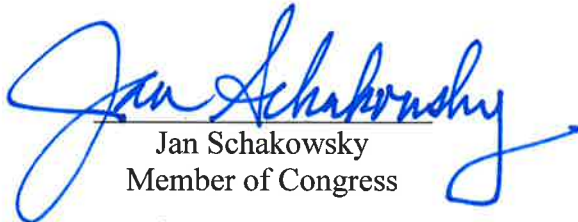
During hearings at the April 2016 session of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR), Dominican human rights defenders testified that the JCE was placing arbitrary barriers for Dominicans of Haitian descent to obtain their identity documents and voter registration cards. This is particularly disturbing given the role the JCE plays as the entity that decides not only when and where elections will be held but also who is eligible to vote in elections. IACHR Executive Secretary Emilio Alvarez Icazar expressed deep concern about the JCE, noting that it "has become an institutional apparatus that reproduces discrimination."

These developments are part of an overall deterioration in the rights of Dominicans of Haitian descent. In 2013, a Constitutional Court ruling stripped hundreds of thousands of Dominicans born of Haitian parents or grandparents of their nationality, creating a crisis of statelessness. A 2014 law created to ameliorate this problem restored citizenship to 55,000 individuals, but many of them have not received documentation in time from the JCE in order to vote as citizens in the upcoming election. Civil society organizations estimate that this group alone could represent as many as 45,000 disenfranchised Dominican citizens.
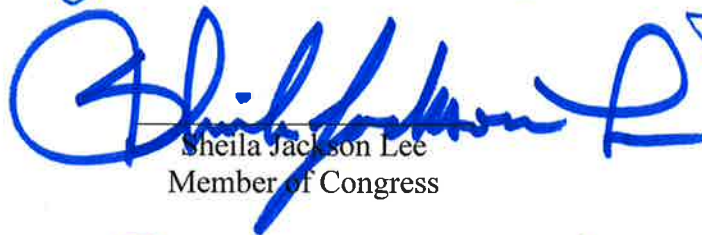
The State Department should urge the Dominican Republic to clarify the current low voter registration numbers and detail what steps the government is actively taking to combat voter suppression and ensure that Dominican citizens of Haitian descent can vote in the May 15 election. We also support the request by Dominican civil society organizations for IACHR observers to ensure that the election is fair, free, and accordant with international standards.
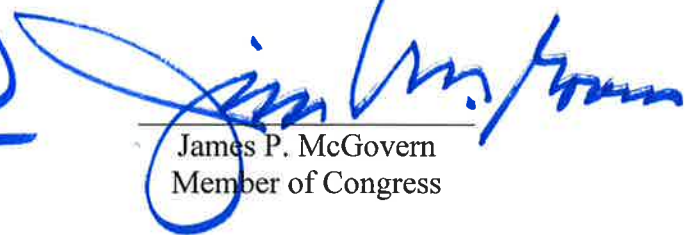
Disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent jeopardizes the credibility of the elections and has serious implications for overall strength of democratic governance in the country. The United States counts the Dominican Republic as an important partner in the region. As such, we urge you to support the right of all Dominican citizens to participate in the democratic process.
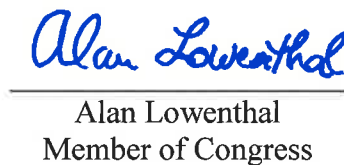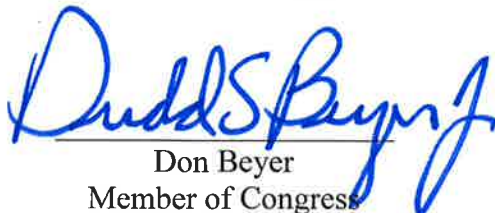
Sincerely,

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress
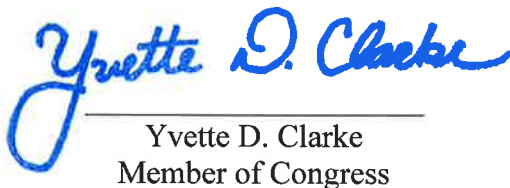
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

David Cicilline
Member of Congress
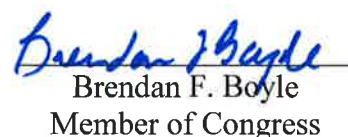
Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

Don Beyer
Member of Congress

Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress

Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

John Conyers, Jr.
Member of Congress
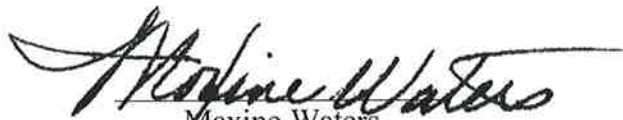
John Lewis
Member of Congress

Brendan F. Boyle
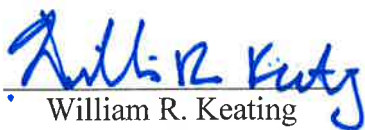Member of Congress

Donna F. Edwards
Member of Congress

Bonnie Watson Coleman
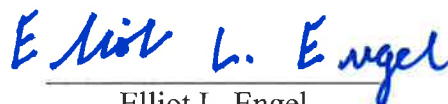Member of Congress

Maxine Waters
Member of Congress
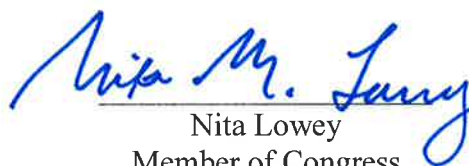
Joseph P. Kennedy
Member of Congress

William R. Keating
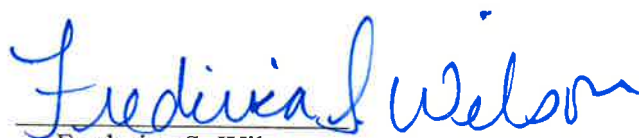Member of Congress

Elliot L. Engel
Member of Congress

Keith Ellison
Member of Congress

Nita Lowey
Member of Congress

Sam Farr
Member of Congress

Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress