

**STATEMENT OF TEQUILA JOHNSON  
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BASED IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

**U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION, CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL  
LIBERTIES**

**HEARING ON  
“DISCRIMINATORY BARRIERS TO VOTING”**

**MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE  
SEPTEMBER 5, 2019**

## **Introduction**

Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the U.S House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary, my name is Tequila Johnson, and I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today on “Discriminatory Barriers to Voting.”

I am thirty-three years old. I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I have lived in Nashville, Tennessee for the past sixteen years. I am a movement builder, strategist, and organizer. My passion is to mobilize my community to bring about progressive change, and to creatively use data, personal stories, and organizing strategies to dismantle discriminatory barriers to voting and other basic rights. I will discuss some of these barriers later in my testimony.

I begin, however, with a more personal story. In order to understand what motivates me to fight for equal opportunity for my community in the voting space in particular, you have to understand where I come from and how my experiences growing up in Tennessee contributed to my political and civic consciousness.

## **My Background and Personal Story**

For generations my ancestors, my family, and my parents worked hard to access and achieve the American Dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For my family, this included fighting for the right to vote and ensuring that our community and other marginalized communities have access to the ballot.

My passion for organizing, strategizing, and advocating for voting rights and other civil rights dates back to when I was a child and I witnessed systemic inequities based on race, wealth, class, and gender. As a child, I can remember traveling miles by foot and bus with my Great Aunt Diane to Signal Mountain, where she cleaned houses and did laundry for wealthy people. I was always in awe of the mansions, extravagance, and the nonchalant interactions she had with her clients. With only a sixth-grade education, she struggled to read and write and would often ask for my assistance, so there were several occasions where I would have to serve as her interpreter talking for her to her clients.

My mom, a young mother who worked two jobs during the day, was so busy she did not have much time. My dad was a struggling drug addict, and he has been in and out of prison since I was two years old. I leaned on my Great Aunt Diane for support and conversation. It was the conversations she and I had that still resonate with me to this day. She was resilient, strong, and fierce. She never missed a day, she never complained, and when I would complain, she would constantly remind me of the price of freedom and self-determination. She made sure I understood that absolutely nothing in life is free except for the ability to choose. She reiterated that freedom was not “free” for Black people, so I should take mine and my path very seriously.

I grew up in the Alton Park Housing Projects in Chattanooga, Tennessee. My family and I lived in the housing projects until I was six years old, and from there, we moved to City View, a low-income apartment complex. It wasn't until I was fourteen years old that my parents were able to

buy their first house in the suburb of Harrison, Tennessee. It was in Harrison that I realized, for the first time, that I was a minority in my school. In high school, I struggled to find my voice in a loud sea of privilege and exposure that I never knew existed. I organized student council elections and strategically used that as leverage to create the first hip hop dance team my school had ever had. I learned a lot in high school and valued my education and exposure. But I knew I would attend a Historically Black College and University. As a first-generation college student, my parents and family were extremely supportive and proud of me. And I knew I could not and would not let them down.

In 2008, the election of President Barack Obama sparked my political interest. I thought, “here is a Black man in a country that has not always given us, Black folks, freedom to be self-determining, being sworn in as a leader.” I cried and I thought of my Great Aunt Diane’s stories. I thought about those who had come before us and fought so hard to get us where we were. I knew then that I had to carry on this tradition of movement building—that civic engagement work was my calling.

Over the next few years I poured myself into civic engagement work. I studied, organized, self-reflected, and listened to the stories of community members. My engagement and advocacy inspired those around me to join the fight as well. In 2016, my best friend Christiane Buggs, a teacher, shared with me her desire to start going to the State Capitol to sit in on the Education Subcommittee hearings in regards to her failing school. We attended these hearings, asked questions, and set up meetings with legislators. We stood out as young, Black women, bold and unapologetic, standing up for our beliefs. We wanted to inspire change; we wanted self-determination and agency for all people, the overlooked, the over policed, and the voiceless.

After witnessing the lack of representation of Black women in the legislature and local school boards, Christiane decided to run for her school board in a highly contested race. She realized that she could affect change by being a school board representative. While working with Christiane, I saw the dismal civic participation in our community. That was also when I saw first-hand how dollars could out vote people and how greedy legislators with their hands in the pockets of lobbyists and special interest groups could pick their constituents. I knew this did not represent the values of our great nation, I knew this was not the self-determination and self-agency my ancestors fought and ultimately died for.

During her campaign, we engaged, mobilized, and encouraged those voters who were statistically less likely to vote, including Black voters—and we won that race. Since being elected, Christiane has implemented policies that, I believe, only a young, Black teacher who has witnessed the issues plaguing schools both inside and outside the classroom could implement. From this experience, I realized what voting does for us—it levels the playing field. It does not matter if you are a billionaire or someone who is struggling to make ends meet—by voting, you have a voice and you have a say in the direction of this country.

## Discriminatory Barriers to Voting in Tennessee

As I began to realize how important it was for my community to become self-determining and to exercise autonomy through voting and active engagement in political processes, I also realized that there were countless systemic and discriminatory barriers to voting that had to be dismantled. This is the next part of my story—identifying barriers and strategically working to overcome them.

- *Voter purges*: In 2016, I learned from community members and friends who tried to vote early in person that they had been purged from the rolls because they had not voted in the last two federal elections. These people did not recall receiving any kind of notice that they were purged and had to re-register. Many of the people who I talked to said that they thought they had voted in the past two election cycles and were wrongfully purged. The purge disproportionately impacted my community, as I heard numerous accounts from friends, family members, and contacts who told me that they could not vote even though they wanted to and thought they had followed all the right steps to cast their ballot. They said that if they had known they needed to reregister, then they would have happily registered to vote.
- *Photo Identification (ID)*: In 2012, the legislature passed a law that required voters to show a photo ID at the polls and this impacted many older Black voters who did not have a government-issued photo ID. One story became viral—where a 96-year old African-American woman brought along a rent receipt, a copy of her lease, her voter registration card and her birth certificate, but was denied the photo ID because her birth certificate was in her maiden name and she didn't show her marriage certificate.<sup>1</sup> While she ultimately got her ID after the intervention of the Senate Speaker at the time, the new photo ID law impacted poor, elderly Black voters who do not always have birth certificates or know their social security numbers.
- *Polling Place Closures*: Prior to the 2018 midterms, I learned from family and community members that a polling location in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Shelby County had closed, and the nearest location was more than twenty minutes away and in a predominantly White neighborhood. This impacted many of the people I know because they did not have the means to drive to the new location and some of them felt uncomfortable being in a predominantly white polling location, as a result of this change, they did not go out and vote.
- *Restrictions on the Right to Vote of Ex-Felons*: Tennessee has some of the most restrictive voting rights restoration laws. This allows only some individuals who were convicted of certain crimes within certain years to have their rights restored. And if you are convicted of crimes other than crimes that are “infamous,” you may still not be eligible to vote because the law also requires you to complete your sentence, fulfill all your legal financial obligations (e.g., child support and restitution), and complete a

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<sup>1</sup> See Yolanda Putman, *NAACP Says Tennessee's Voter ID Law Makes It Harder for Poor, Minorities to Vote* (July 25, 2016), <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2016/jul/25/naacp-officials-local-leaders-encourage-minor/377604/>.

certificate of restoration. I have personally helped several people restore their rights and it is a daunting process, especially for someone who is struggling to find their place in society. Recently, I learned from documents I received from a public records request that most denials of restoration applications are because a person has not paid child support, which under Tennessee law, accrues while the person is incarcerated. So, the accrual of large amounts of child support and other financial blocks to voting become barriers to folks who should be otherwise able to vote.

- *Restrictions on Voter Registration Efforts of Civic Engagement Groups:* In 2018, I served as the statewide director for the Tennessee Black Voter Project. The project was a collaboration between nearly two dozen Black-led nonprofits and organizations in Tennessee. We set a collective goal to submit voter registration forms from underrepresented neighborhoods in the state. And by the voter registration deadline, we submitted tens of thousands of forms. Then in 2019, the legislature passed a new law restricting the ability of civic engagement groups and individuals from registering voters in large-scale voter registration efforts. The restrictions ranged from groups and individuals having to preregister with the State, swear an oath that they will obey the law, receive consent from all applicants before recording any of their personal information, not turn in “incomplete” forms above a certain number per year, and include a disclaimer with a “public communication” regarding “voter registration status” that such communication is not authorized or in conjunction with the Secretary of State. There is more—violation of these provisions could open civic engagement groups and individuals that register large numbers of voters to criminal penalties and civil fines up to but not necessarily limited to \$10,000. This makes it difficult for third-parties to register voters at voter registration events, where many disenfranchised, low-income, and minority individuals register to vote.

### **My Organizing and Strategizing to Dismantle Some of These Barriers**

I was inspired by what Tennessee Congressman Jim Cooper said about voting, “democracy works best when everyone participates.” That phrase has stuck with me because it is so true, but it is not a sentiment that is shared by everyone. When I think about the sacrifices my ancestors made to ensure our citizenship and the right to participate in the civic process, I know that I am fighting on the right side of history.

Through my work for The Equity Alliance along with co-founder Charlane Oliver, we disrupted the status quo by exploring new ways to engage black voters and expand the electorate. The organization has partnered with churches, sororities, and libraries and hosted more than four voter block parties at polling precincts. We have organized and engaged in countless state, local, and national elections. We share the belief that using our voting power in the fight for social justice and economic equality for all communities is one of the most effective ways to bring about positive change. As part of my work for The Equity Alliance, I have helped host more than four voter block parties at polling precincts, hosted several events, and designed political education trainings to name a few. The organization has partnered with churches, universities, businesses, and libraries. This work has helped me gain recognition on a national and global scale my work has been nationally recognized by The New York Times, the Washington Post,

Pew Charitable Trusts, CNN, MSNBC, and the Huffington Post, to name a few. —most recently, I delivered a commencement speech at a high school in Vislec, Germany.

Since 2016, I have rolled up my sleeves and pants’ legs to dive headfirst into identifying barriers (which I have listed above) and trying to find ways to overcome them through education and political engagement. My organizing approach is unconventional, exciting and unapologetic. I believe in meeting people where they are, and that collaboration is the new leadership. Most times, I’ve been the only African-American in key government meetings, important policy hearings, at the state capitol and because of this I co-founded five community organizations including The Equity Alliance, The Equity Alliance Fund, The Power of Ten Pac, The Nashville Justice League, and Faith Unchained to bring more people like me into these critical conversations about voting and justice—empowerment is my power.

Overall, I’ve realized that registering voters is a necessary step for them to exercise their right to vote. I’ve organized and registered potential voters in churches, night clubs, laundromats, football games—my tactic is to meet registrants where they are. This has been the most effective in engaging voters from my community, who have been historically disenfranchised, and often feel apathy towards the political process from which they have been excluded.

That’s why I believe Congress has a constitutional obligation to act to ensure every American citizen has equitable access to exercise their voting rights. I believe that modern, fair, and free elections are critical to removing institutional barriers that have suppressed the voices of black voters since Reconstruction. I believe that passing H.R. 1 was a necessary step, but you must also renew the full Voting Rights Act of 1965 that gave African Americans full citizenship in this country. I also urge you to hold states accountable. A new National Voter Registration Act, for example, could limit states in what they can do to penalize voter registration groups, and they could pass a nationwide mandatory motor-voter law to automatically register those seeking driver’s licenses and state ID cards.

### Conclusion

Organizing and strategizing are central to my ability to carry out civic engagement work, to get my community and even the global community interested in voting, politics, and policy change. With the help of Congress, I hope to continue fighting for the self-determination of my community and carrying on the tradition of activism informed by data-driven, people centered approaches and grassroots community engagement.

Dated: 9/2/2019



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Tequila Johnson