

**Statement of Stacey Y. Abrams  
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**On Strengthening American Democracy Testimony Before the House Committee on  
House Administration  
February 25, 2021**

Thank you, Chairperson Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the committee.

The morning of January 6, millions of Americans had their eyes on Georgia as the final results of the January 5 runoff election became clear. Georgia voters of every political persuasion had turned out in record numbers; and in the final tally, we had elected the first Jewish and first Black U.S. Senators from our state.

Yet, as the day progressed, our nation's attention turned from Georgia's elections towards a besieged Washington, as a deadly mob stormed the U.S. Capitol, desecrating the seat of our democracy. In an obscene effort to subvert the will of the American people and nullify a free and fair election, American citizens sought to obliterate the citizenship of others. The attempted coup was defeated, but the scar on our democracy remains.

This insurrection culminated from a nearly year-long disinformation campaign warning of a rigged election – and a two-decade assault on voting rights, centered around racist and baseless allegations of voter fraud. The 2020 contest has been audited, evaluated and investigated, and both Republicans and the majority of the U.S. Supreme Court have acknowledged no evidence of widespread fraud.

A lie cloaked in the seductive appeal of integrity has weakened access to democracy for millions. However, the truth is this: Congress must to act boldly and quickly to safeguard, strengthen and preserve our democracy.

Voter suppression relies on a triumvirate of attacks: barriers to voter registration and staying on electoral rolls, obstacles to receiving and casting a ballot and impediments to having lawful votes counted.

Faced with a changing demography, as our nation becomes more diverse in race and ideology, the anti-democratic forces in the Republican party have focused their energy on peddling unwarranted and expensive voter restriction measures. To date, according the Voting Rights Lab tracker, more than 230 bills have been put forward in thirty-eight state legislatures seeking to restrict voting access. Lest anyone argue that these bills are ordinary in their volume or direction, the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice issued a report from the first week of February 2021 finding that state legislators across the country had already introduced over four times the number of bills to restrict voting access as generally compared to the first week of February 2020 – an election year.

The legislation often comes with a disclaimer that the restrictions are necessary to restore confidence in voting or to ensure election integrity. Yet the Secretaries of State in these jurisdictions uniformly rejected outcries of voter fraud or issues of voter integrity. As a Republican committee chairman in my home state of Georgia admitted during a recent hearing regarding an anti-voting rights bill, there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud, and that this excuse is "just in people's minds." With this admission, I would challenge this committee to consider what could have changed so dramatically between November 2020 and February 2021.

In Georgia, record turnout among communities of color, particularly Black voters, helped propel Democrats to victory on November 3 and January 5, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. For more than a decade, Georgians have utilized early voting options, including weekend voting, as well as the ability to vote by mail without an excuse. With most of these advances made during Republican leadership of the legislature, these practices enjoyed bipartisan support, and routinely resulted in the election of Republican candidates. The notable difference in this new raft of repressive legislation is the composition of usership for these options: namely communities of color, young people and newly-forming coalitions of shifting political ideologies.

Thus, when Georgia voters participated in the 2020 elections, overall voter turnout in Georgia increased 22.1% from 2016 to 2020 (4,092,373 votes to 4,998,482). The narrow margin of victory for a Democratic candidate was driven primarily by a large increase in Georgians voting early, particularly by mail, and by large increases in turnout among voters of color. The highest total number of African-American voters participated in the 2020 election, and Asian American and Pacific Islander total voters as well as Latino total voters more than doubled from 2016 to 2020.

Georgia Republicans responded to increased turnout by filing legislation to make it harder to register to vote, to cast a ballot and to have that ballot counted. To be specific, Georgia Republicans introduced 50 bills in the state legislature that would curb access to the ballot box, with no meaningful difference in the 2016 to 2020 elections other than increased uniformity in access to information and increased participation in using these options.

Georgia saw record turnout in the 2020 general election and 2021 senate runoffs. Voters took particular advantage of early vote opportunities, with more than 3.9 million Georgians voting early in the 2020 general election in Georgia.

- 1,316,943 Georgia voters voted by mail
- 2,694,879 Georgia voters voted early in person
- 986,660 Georgia voters voted on Election Day/provisionally

The January 5th Georgia runoffs became the first time Democrats beat Republican turnout during in-person early voting. Turnout among Black Georgia voters was particularly strong on weekends, where they outpaced their share of the electorate by nearly 6% in the general election. Republicans have responded to this strong turnout by proposing legislation to eliminate Sunday voting and slashing half of Saturday voting opportunities. While the target may be Black

voters, this change also impacts the tens of thousands Jewish voters who may not be able to participate in weekend voting if Sunday is eliminated.

Other bills filed include repealing GOP-instituted automatic voter registration, severely restricting in-person early vote opportunities, repealing no-excuse vote by mail, and banning previously eligible provisional ballots from being counted. Voters that identified as Asian, Hispanic, and African American, were more likely to cast their early vote ballot on the weekends than those that identified as white (13.1%, 11.8%, 11.4% vs 8.6% respectively).

Georgia stands as a singular example of the legislative whiplash from defending the integrity of elections in November and January to these naked attempts to erect new hurdles for voters of color, young voters, poor voters and other marginalized voters such as the disabled. Unfortunately, Georgia is not alone in this tragic attempt to employ voter suppression in response to diverse voter participation. In Arizona, the state also saw record turnout in 2020, with participation growing by 27.2% from 2016 to 2020 (2,661,497 to 3,385,294), driven primarily by growth in Latino and Native American voters, and because of an electorate that was younger than in 2016.

- 88.2% of Arizona voted by mail in 2020, an increase of 13.0 percentage points (75.2% in 2016)
- 2,986,962 Arizona voters voted by mail
- 398,332 Arizona voters came in person (Election Day + provisionals)

For the first time in modern Arizona history, Democrats closed the early vote gap to less than 1% or just 22,000 votes, in the 2020 general election compared with an early vote gap of 100,000 in 2016. The top election official for Maricopa County acknowledged the importance of voter access: “We opened the doors to access...When you get over 2 million people casting a ballot and less than 200,000 of them are actually walking in on Election Day and casting a fresh ballot, that’s important.” Of particular note, this election official, Adrian Fontes, lost his own race in November to a Republican, but he continued to lead the ballot counting process and pushback against conspiracy theories.

As in Georgia, the response has been a raft of legislation to suppress voter participation. Arizona Republicans responded to increased turnout by filing legislation to severely restrict vote by mail. For example, bills have been filed to repeal no-excuse vote by mail, ban the return of a ballot by mail, ban vote centers, criminalize drop box ballot return by immediate family members and purge tens of thousands of voters from the permanent early vote list. These efforts disproportionately impact voters of color. One bill to purge the permanent early vote list was estimated to remove between 25,000 and 50,000 Latino voters.

Pennsylvania is another state whose success in increased participation has led to attempts at suppression. In 2020, over 6.9 million Pennsylvanians voted in the general election, a record high since 1960. The state also saw more than 71% of the voting population casting a ballot, a 10% increase in participation from 2016 and its highest participation rate in over 60 years. Turnout in Pennsylvania increased 13.1% from 2016 to 2020 (6,115,402 to 6,915,283), driven

primarily by growth in vote by mail, which was permitted without an excuse for the first time. More than 37.8% of Pennsylvania voters cast their ballots by mail, an increase of 33.5 percentage points (4.3% in 2016).

- 2,616,012 Pennsylvania voters voted by mail
- 4,299,208 Pennsylvania voters voted in person (Election Day or provisionally)

Philadelphia saw its highest turnout in 25 years, with 749,000 voters participating in the election, nearly half by mail ballot. Turnout also increased from 59% in 2016 to 64% in 2020. Despite the high number of early votes cast, Philadelphia still saw 1-2 hour lines on election day.

Pennsylvania Republicans responded to record high turnout and participation by significantly increasing barriers to cast mail ballots early. For example, bills have been filed to repeal no-excuse absentee voting, eliminate in-person absentee voting, prohibit voters from curing mistakes on their ballot, repeal the permanent early vote list, add multiple signature requirements for the same ballot, restrict drop boxes and encourage mass voter purges.

In states where Democrats did not succeed but the composition of the electorate changed, bills are also in motion. In Texas, Republicans have filed bills to increase penalties to voters for residency mistakes on voter registration forms from a misdemeanor to a state jail felony, create new state jail felony offenses for election officials who allow provisional voters to vote a regular ballot or accept more than 3 out of precinct voters at their polling location, eliminate in-person return of mail ballots. In South Carolina, Republicans have filed legislation significantly reducing the number of early vote and election day polling locations from 1 for every 500 voters to 1 for every 3000. In Florida, while promoting false claims of election security, Governor Ron DeSantis announced voting proposals to restrict the mailing of mail-in ballots and to significantly limit access to dropboxes. Montana has introduced legislation to require students to have a second form of ID, while in New Hampshire, Republicans filed legislation to remove college ID cards from accepted forms of in-person voting ID altogether.

HR 1 would not negate every harm posed by these legislative assaults due to the delegation of power to the states with regards to election administration. However, the provisions of HR 1 would address the core assaults on voter access and create a uniform foundation for democracy in America that does not rely on geography. Expansion and protection of voting rights has long had a storied bipartisan history in America, despite attempts by leaders in both parties to thwart equality. Indeed, this body has come together after controversial elections to demand reforms that serve neither party – but instead speak to the will and needs of the electorate. Election administration should never be a weapon to be wielded against eligible Americans. To wit, this body has established protections for our military, our disabled, our elderly and those who are loyal to our nation but new to the English language.

The For the People Act is a contemporary example of the courage of the many to oppose the fears of the few. Recent news reports from around the country bemoan what has become a legion of bills designed to renew the ugliest chapters of voter suppression in our nation. Indeed, Joshua A. Douglas, professor of law at University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of

Law remarked, “There was record turnout and zero evidence of massive voter fraud. ... So, the logical next step would be to continue what worked well and even expand upon those successes. But instead, Republican legislators in numerous states are advancing new laws to cut back on voter access.”

HR 1 has broad-based and bipartisan support for its provisions to empower voters and expand access to the franchise, outlaw voter purging, restore the Voting Rights Act, improve the redistricting process to serve the needs of voters, and protect our right to free, fair and safe elections. Democracy works best when install guardrails to ensure every American has an equal opportunity to make their voice heard and be fairly represented. This set of pro-democracy reforms will place power back in the hands of everyday Americans – of every political stripe.

We must pass HR 1, the For the People Act, to embolden, revitalize and strengthen our democracy. Because meaningful progress on health care, racial justice and the rebuilding of our economy requires aggressive action on voting rights, partisan gerrymandering and campaign finance. The purveyors of voter suppression seek to preserve power by limiting the voices heard rather than winning voters over.

Congress alone holds the power to implement federal protections against retribution meted out at the ballot box. This body can and must respect the differences in states and allow them to decide how best administer elections to meet the specific needs of its people. However, modern election laws demand a basis of uniformity to ensure election integrity – not election insincerity.

Each American’s ability to access our democracy should not rely on their state of residence. Justice comes from the equal opportunity to access and participate in the arena of our democracy. We all have a right to take our seat at the table and our place at the ballot box.

I thank you for the opportunity to take part in this important discussion, and I urge you to continue to protect and strengthen our democracy.