

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF CLIFF ALBRIGHT, BLACK VOTERS MATTER

TO

THE U.S. HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ELECTIONS

OF

THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

2/19/19

Chairwoman Fudge and All Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am the cofounder of Black Voters Matter, along with LaTosha Brown (formally known as BVM Capacity Building Institute). Our mission is to build power in predominantly Black communities, and we view elections as one way of doing so.

During 2018, we traveled throughout 7 states seeking to mobilize Black voters and supporting over 120 community-based partner groups. These seven states were Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee, with honorable mention to Texas, where we spent just a few days in Harris County.

Collectively these states form the bulk of the old confederacy – the old, *failed*, confederacy – a historical fact which is very much related to the topic of this hearing. And while each of these states has its own examples of voter suppression during the recent midterms, the epicenter of voter suppression was arguably right here in Georgia.

Georgia Voter Suppression

By now, I'm sure most of the committee is familiar with the headlines:

- A gubernatorial candidate refusing to step down as chief election official –instead, presiding over, and picking voters, in his own election;
- Purging of 1.5 million voters;
- Holding on to 53,000 voter registrations, most of which from Black voters;
- Inadequate supply of machines, which themselves are highly problematic;
- Thousands of provisional ballots not counted;
- Thousands of absentee ballots either lost or simply not counted; and
- The closing polling places, including in Randolph County, where there was an attempt to close 7 out of 9 polling places, including precincts where over 90% of voters were Black. The suggested closings were based on advice from a consultant recommended by Brian Kemp's office. In Randolph County, these suppression efforts were defeated thanks to organizing efforts of several organizations, including the NAACP, the ACLU, Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, New Georgia Project and others.
 - However, other counties haven't been so lucky. The Atlanta-Journal Constitution reported that over the past 6 years, 214 of the state's precincts have been closed. That's 8% of Georgia's polling places that have been closed.
 - This doesn't fully take into account the reduction in early voting locations. In one very rural county, early voting locations were reduced to 2 polling places, and rather than spreading the two across the rural county, they put both locations in the same building!

Jefferson County

Which brings me to the events of October 15, 2018 in Jefferson County, Georgia. We began our day with a voter mobilization rally at a Senior Center. We shared our message of love and power with dozens of seniors who were excited to participate. In fact, the group was so excited that the rally moved into the parking lot where we added some music and had a good old dance party as the Seniors sang along with James Brown, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud!” The group then asked if they could ride our bus—the Blackest Bus in America—to go early vote at the polling place just down the street. But before we could depart, the center’s director received a call from the county administrator stating that the seniors could not ride the bus to go vote. In the interest of time, I will spare the committee the administrator’s inadequate and racist response, but will gladly discuss during Q&A.

State Troopers

Ours wasn’t the only vehicle to be blocked from providing rides to the polls. In Cordele, Georgia, one of our partners was providing rides to the polls when he was given a parking ticket by a state trooper. I repeat, a *state trooper* gave him a parking ticket, and then proceeded to call for backup, resulting in a total of 7 patrol cars, 5 of which were state troopers.

Investigations

What we’ve seen is a pattern of intimidation, and one of the most aggressive entities has been the Secretary of State’s office itself. The office has an investigative unit, which has pursued several high profile and yet frivolous cases against effective voting rights organizations. Moreover, these armed investigators often conduct home visits to individual voters or activists, knowing that their pointless visits can have a chilling effect on civic engagement. In fact, just a few days ago, one of these investigators visited the community organizer who had invited us to Jefferson County.

Intimidation Doesn’t Stop on Election Day

The intimidation doesn’t stop on election day. On November 13, a week after the election, in the rotunda of the Georgia Capitol building, 15 peaceful protestors were arrested simply for making the very basic demand that this state should count every vote. Oddly enough, one of those arrested was a state senator, Senator Nikema Williams, in spite of Georgia law which forbids the arrest of legislators while the Assembly is in session.

Now some may hear this story and think to themselves, “that was after the election; what does that have to do with voter suppression?” And my answer is very simple. It has EVERYTHING to do with voter suppression, because those arrests—just like the secretary of state investigations, and just like the 7 patrol cars for rides to the polls—those arrests were meant to intimidate and silence.

It was meant to send a message, to those arrested as well as to those watching, that:

- if you participate in these activities,
- if you organize and educate voters,
- if you demand that your vote be counted

You too can be arrested.

Fannie Lou Hamer once asked the question, in a hearing not unlike this, she asked “Is this America?” And now, 55 years later, with a weakened Voting Rights Act, evidently the answer is “yes”. This is America. This is Georgia.

But I am here today to say the same thing we said all throughout 2018, every time our voters were suppressed, every time our canvassers were harassed and every time our bus was threatened. I’m here to say today: can’t stop, won’t stop.

Madame Chair, again I thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering questions from the committee.