

## **Statement of Kerry Washington**

### **U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis Hearing on “Ensuring a Free, Fair, and Safe Election During the Coronavirus Pandemic” September 9, 2020**

Thank you, Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and members of the Select Subcommittee. I am grateful to you for taking the time to hear my testimony, and the testimonies of my fellow witnesses.

I am here not as an artist or entertainer but as an American. And as an advocate who believes deeply in the power of voting. That’s the reason I became a co-chair of When We All Vote, a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to increasing participation in every election. And it’s why I’m here today.

When I turned 18, my mother and father took me out to dinner in the Bronx, where I grew up. Not just to celebrate my birthday, but to celebrate the fact that I was old enough to vote. My parents never took their vote for granted. They believed it was a sacred obligation. And it is.

Not too long ago, an 18-year-old Black woman would not have been able to vote—for three reasons.

As you know, the legal age for voting used to be 21. So at 18, you could get shipped off to war without having any say in who your Commander in Chief was.

As you also know, women were denied the right to vote. We only just celebrated the 100th anniversary of women fighting for and earning that right.

And of course, it used to be that Black people could not vote. When our Constitution was written, our founding fathers designated Black Americans to be worth only three-fifths the value of a human being. Giving us a vote was out of the question.

But as an 18-year-old Black woman, I voted. And I will proudly vote this November. Because we all share the right and responsibility to vote in order to shape this democracy and to bring us closer to a more perfect union.

Our ancestors fought to widen the circle of people who could vote. And now, on our watch, it is at serious risk of contracting.

As you all know, there are many reasons for this: gerrymandering, which minimizes the impact voters can have, based solely on where they live, and the purging of voter rolls, which keeps people from casting their ballots at all. Nearly all of these reasons disproportionately target Black voters and voters of color.

In Georgia, more than 300,000 names were purged from the voter rolls last year alone. An ACLU study found that over 63% of those names—nearly 200,000 American citizens—were “wrongly purged” and, through no fault of their own, were unable to vote.<sup>i</sup> Some may call that a mistake, but it is impossible to ignore that there exists a well-financed, highly strategic effort to disenfranchise voters.<sup>ii</sup>

That is what we are up against. Black people’s experiences of voter suppression have always been the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. If we don’t pay attention to those experiences—if we don’t correct them—we are at risk of losing our democracy. For everyone.

And all of that was true *before* COVID-19. We are now facing a perfect storm of circumstances that will make it harder than ever for people to vote. A deadly pandemic—one that has been even deadlier for Black, Native, and Latinx people. An economic recession—one that makes it even harder for many workers to take time off to vote.

The primary season has already shown us how difficult it can be for people to cast their ballots in this environment. But in the lead-up to November 3rd, we have an opportunity to move forward with new strategies and new innovations that can make voting easier and more fair.

Many states are already taking action. Michigan is mailing postcards to over 4 million registered voters to encourage them to request absentee ballots.<sup>iii</sup> The Nevada legislature has passed a bill to send every active, registered voter a mail-in ballot.<sup>iv</sup> Other states—like Florida, Georgia, Texas, and Wisconsin—need to follow their lead.

As members of this Select Subcommittee, you have a unique opportunity to help states meet the challenges they’re facing. I believe there are three important steps you can take to give American voters more options for casting their ballots.

First, you can make your voices louder than the voices of leaders who disparage voting by mail—while voting by mail themselves. You can tell the American people that using these and other mechanisms to vote is not fraud; it is their right.

Second, you can appropriate more money to states for election administration, so that states can hire poll workers, run polling sites safely, and buy sorting and counting machines. The \$400 million authorized under the CARES Act was critical, but the non-partisan Brennan Center for Justice recommended in April that Congress make at least \$4 billion available.<sup>v</sup>

And finally, many of you have paid tribute to Congressman John Lewis since his passing. I believe the single best way to honor Congressman Lewis’s legacy is to continue to fight for the expansion of the Voting Rights Act.

In closing, I'd like to speak directly to American voters. I know this is a time of great uncertainty. You may wonder how best to make your voice heard at this moment. Voting is how you make your voice heard in the halls of power, and what I can tell you is that there are more options than ever to cast your ballot.

It is so important that you vote, that you vote early, and that you encourage your friends and family and neighbors to vote early, as well. That is how we fight voter suppression: by exercising our right to vote and by voting for representatives who represent our best interests.

Today, I am asking our representatives in Congress to do everything in their power to make our election safe and secure. But we need to do our part, too. We cannot sit this one out.

So, make a plan. Please don't wait until November. Your vote matters. You matter.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Annie Grayer and Pamela Kirkland, "Georgia likely removed nearly 200k from voter rolls wrongfully, report says," *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/02/politics/georgia-voter-rolls-report/index.html> (September 2, 2020)

<sup>ii</sup> See: ACLU, "Block the Vote: Voter Suppression in 2020," <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/block-the-vote-voter-suppression-in-2020/> (February 3, 2020) and Michael Wines, "Freed by Court Ruling, Republicans Step Up Effort to Patrol Voting," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/Voting-republicans-trump.html?referringSource=articleShare> (May 18, 2020)

<sup>iii</sup> Dave Boucher, "Michigan SOS Benson to mail millions of postcards to encourage absentee voting," *Detroit Free Press*, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/08/13/absentee-voting-election-michigan-benson-postcard/3364515001/> (August 13, 2020)

<sup>iv</sup> "Nevada passes bill to mail all voters ballots amid pandemic," *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nevada-mail-in-voting-bill-passes-coronavirus-pandemic> (August 3, 2020)

<sup>v</sup> Lawrence Norden, Edgardo Cortés, et al, "Estimated Costs of Covid-19 Election Resiliency Measures," Brennan Center for Justice, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/estimated-costs-covid-19-election-resiliency-measures> (Updated April 18, 2020)