



Congresswoman Nikema Williams 2023 Committee on House Administration Member Day Testimony

For the last two election cycles, millions and millions of Georgians have come out in record numbers to vote and make their voices heard. In presidential years, in midterms, and in runoffs, the people of Georgia have made it clear that they want the opportunity, access, and freedom to vote.

And while I like to say that Atlanta Influences Everything, we are seeing record turnout and engagement all around the country. And no one would be happier to see so many people exercising their fundamental right to vote than my friend, mentor, and predecessor, Congressman John Lewis.

He fought and bled to ensure people who look and think like me and many of my constituents are considered full citizens, with all the respect, dignity, and rights that entails. Of course, he knew his fight was not finished - it is incumbent on all of us to keep his legacy alive.

Unfortunately, not everyone has gotten that message. Instead of celebrating civic engagement and the strength of our democracy, they see the American people making their voice heard as a threat. They try to pass draconian voter suppression laws and aggressively gerrymander districts. They favor certain types of voting used by the voters they like and limit the types of voting used by those they don't. They allow and encourage voter intimidation and confusion, and when all of that fails, just substitute their own will for the will of the voters and local governments.

We know this first hand in Georgia. After nearly 5 million Georgians showed up in the 2020 elections, then in record numbers for the January runoff, they didn't rejoice in their constituents being heard or the efficient administration of our state's biggest ever election. Instead, they went right to work making sure this success of democracy never happened again.

Georgia's Jim Crow 2.0 voter suppression law, SB 202, which was signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp, undermines what should be our shared desire for inclusive, accessible elections administered by independent and protected election officials. It made it harder to vote by mail, limited access to ballot dropboxes and early voting, let anyone challenge anyone else's voter registration for any reason, and allowed the State Election Board to replace or override county election officials at will.

And when these didn't work as well as they'd like, they're going farther!

We've seen the Georgia legislature replace election boards in 11 counties across the state, replacing hard-working, committed, bi-and-non-partisan election workers, frequently people of color, with people chosen specifically *for* their partisan, anti-democracy credentials. Because they believe that people who don't look and think like them, people who look and think like I and many of my constituents do, do not deserve to have power in this country.

We're seeing efforts now to make it even harder to vote. In Georgia, they're trying to ban dropboxes. SB 202 already made it so dropboxes were only open during business hours and inside or near staffed offices. Now, because of some nonsense conspiracy theories, they want to get rid of them. All this does is waste the valuable time of voters and election workers, and makes voting harder. They also want to set specific and heightened standards on unhoused voters, making them targets for voter intimidation and confusion.

It gets worse! SB 202 allowed anyone to challenge anyone else's voter registration, leading to hundreds of thousands of baseless challenges, each of which must be reviewed and receive a hearing. And now they want to make these challenges easier! This is already creating a massive administrative burden on overworked, under-resourced election officials, preventing them from doing their jobs ensuring our elections run smoothly. And let's be clear, the registrations being challenged are those of low-income people who might move around, college students, or people whose names make conspiracy theorists suspicious; they are targeting, harassing, and intimidating those most marginalized in an attempt to say that they are not welcome in our elections

We might not be counting jelly beans in a jar, but these efforts seek the same result—suppressing the votes of people of color and those most marginalized. We also have to understand these efforts as a pattern. During Reconstruction, more than 1,500 Black people were elected to office from 1865-1877. And this scared people who viewed Black people having power as a threat. Their backlash led to things like literacy tests and poll taxes and Grandfather clauses and all-white primaries to deny people who look like me and many of my constituents the rights of citizenship they were entitled to.

The vote suppressors of today may use different tactics, but they are animated by the same fears and aiming towards the same goals. They use big data and sophisticated software to target people of color with "almost surgical precision." They look at who votes in which way, then if they like you, they make it easier to vote the way you want; if they don't, they make it harder.

We need to be out loud and on purpose about standing up for the full humanity, dignity, and rights for all citizens, no matter their race, gender, age, language status, ethnicity, disability, bank account, or ZIP Code. The right to vote is fundamental - we need Congressional action to ensure our constituents can have their voice heard in our democracy. And we must name the problem and put it into current and historical context.

I look forward to joining with anyone who wants to get into some Good Trouble and being a co conspirator for justice with me, because either you're on the side of our democracy or you're not.