

## **Majority Leader Schumer Remarks At Senate Rules Committee Markup Of S.1.**

### **The For The People Act, Legislation To Strengthen Democracy And Make It Easier, Not Harder, To Vote**

“Who are to be the electors of the federal representatives?” James Madison asked at the Constitutional Convention. “Not the rich, more than the poor; not the learned, more than the ignorant; not the haughty heirs of distinguished names. The electors are to be the great body of the People of the United States.”

That noble principle—mass participation in representative government—might have been the object of the founders, but it was not a practice. Immediately excluded were 700,000 enslaved men and women, counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of congressional allotment, but zero-fifths of a person in all other matters of human dignity. Women—too—were left out. Voting requirements were left to the states.

So despite Madison’s sentiments, at the time of our Constitution’s ratification, you had to be a white, male, oftentimes Protestant, landowner to vote. By the election of 1800, barely more than 1 in 10 Americans were even eligible to vote. Of the sixteen states then in the Union, all but three limited suffrage to property holders or taxpayers.

How many in this room would have been able to participate in those early elections? Not very many.

But ever since, Americans have sought to right that wrong, and establish the United States as a full democracy. We fought a bloody civil war to end slavery. Women organized and reached for the ballot. The civil rights movement brought an end to the vicious segregation of the mid-20th Century.

And here in Congress, we passed the Voting Rights Act, the National Voter Registration Act, and the 14th, 15th, 19th, 23rd, 24th and 26th amendments to expand the franchise until there were no more boundaries.

The story of democracy in America has been an inexorable march towards universal suffrage.

That march has not always been linear. Throughout our nation’s history, moments of significant progress have often been followed by reactionary backlash.

Unfortunately it seems—led by one party, compelled by the most dishonest president in our history—we are on the verge of entering another one of those dark periods.

In the wake of the 2020 elections—deemed the most secure in American history by officials in the previous Administration—former President Trump told a lie, a big lie, that the election was stolen.

Without proof or evidence, the former president and his allies repeated this lie, over and over again, poisoning faith in our democracy and fomenting an armed insurrection at the Capitol.

And now, in states across the country, Republican legislatures have seized on the big lie to restrict the franchise, and inevitably make it harder for African-Americans, Latinos, students and the working poor to vote.

Here in the 21st Century, we are witnessing an attempt at the greatest contraction of voting rights since the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow.

All across the country, Republicans no longer want to let all the voters pick their politicians, they want to let politicians pick their voters—deliberately targeting all the ways that younger, poorer, and non-white Americans typically access the ballot.

Iowa cut early voting by nine days, restricted absentee voting, and will close polls an hour earlier.

Montana ended Election-day registration and will no longer allow student ID's to be used as a primary form of identification.

In Florida, where African Americans and poorer voters rely on after-hours drop boxes, Republicans limited their use. In a landmark moment for the First Amendment, the press was not allowed to attend the governor's signing ceremony—except for Fox News.

In Texas, Republicans advanced two voter suppression bills, one in each chamber. The original bill in the Texas State House specified that its purpose was to maintain “the ‘purity’ of the ballot box” – a euphemism that dates back to the 1800s and was used as justification for Texas' sordid history of all-white primaries. The offensive language was eventually stripped from the bill, but much of the policy remained the same.

In Arizona, a state representative defended Republican attempts to limit ballot access by saying, quite succinctly, that: “everybody shouldn't be voting.”

In the time since this committee met, the state of Georgia has made it a crime – a crime – for volunteers to provide food and water to voters waiting in long lines at the polls.

I mean, my god. Why aren't my Republican colleagues outraged by this?

Why, when a few corporations had the audacity to put out statements opposing the Georgia law—did the Republican leader tell them to “stay out of politics” and stop acting like “a woke parallel government.”

For supporting voting rights!

What have we come to? What have we come to?

I want to be very clear today: these laws have no justification rooted in fact or purpose other than the desire for raw political advantage.

Don't tell us these laws are about voter fraud. You are more likely in America to be struck by lightning than commit voter fraud.

Don't tell us these laws are about "strengthening our elections." Shortening the early vote doesn't strengthen our elections. Limiting the number of drop boxes doesn't strengthen our elections. Criminalizing food and water to voters doesn't strengthen our elections.

These laws are about one thing and one thing alone: making it harder for Americans to vote.

They are reprehensible, in my judgment. They are anti-democratic, in the judgment of most. And they carry the stench of oppression.

In democracy, when you lose an election, you try to persuade more voters to vote for you. You don't try to ban the other side from voting—that's what Orbán does. That's what Erdoğan does. That's what dictators do.

So what are my Republican colleagues in the Senate going to do?

These laws carry the stench of oppression, the smell of bigotry. Are you going to stamp it out, or are you going to allow it to be spread?

I plead with my Republican colleagues, think twice. I plead with Leader McConnell, think twice.

The eyes of history are on all of you. Where are you going to stand?

Think twice, please, my Republican friends. Think twice, Leader McConnell.

President Trump told a big lie, one of the biggest ever told. We all know that. Every single person in this room knows that. Every single person. And it's taking root, this big lie is taking root in our country. Not just in the minds of his voters, but in the laws of the land.

When you perpetuate or tolerate lies about the election like this, you erode our democracy! When people don't believe elections are on the level, it places us on a road to autocracy. Who knows what will happen next? Who knows.

This is a sad and dark moment, I must say, for the Republican Party. Republicans are seeking to perpetrate and act upon the big lie that the election was stolen, simply to placate, maybe please the most dishonest president in American history.

And unfortunately, the big lie is spreading like a cancer among Republicans. The big lie is enveloping and consuming the Republican Party, in both houses of Congress.

Down the hall from us, House Republicans are plotting the demotion of a Republican member for the crime of repeating the truth: that Joe Biden is the president of the United States and that Donald Trump is lying. Liz Cheney spoke truth to power, and for that, she's being fired.

Here in the Senate, Republicans appear content to allow the sacred right to vote to be taken away from millions on the false ground that there was fraud—something for which there is no evidence.

Even my good friend from Missouri thinks we have to stop future fraud. Stop people from voting because there might be future fraud? That's not the way to do this.

Every Republican in this room knows Joe Biden won the election fair and square. Everyone. Everyone knows that Donald Trump perpetrated the big lie. But the price of admission in today's Republican Party is silence in the face of provable lies. Lies that—right now— are poisoning our democracy and exciting a plague of voter suppression.

This is a danger, not just to the Republican Party, I believe it's a danger to the Republican Party and we need two strong parties, but it's a danger to the Republic.

Aren't there a few Republicans who will refuse to follow the rush of their party? Who will follow the example of a Liz Cheney here on this committee today?

Maybe there will be a Republican who will support this bill, or at the very least offer constructive amendments. I hope there will be a few? I hope and pray.

The bill before this committee has a very simple premise: make it easier—not harder—to vote. S.1 would nullify many of these voter suppression laws and protect the rights of American voters, whether they cast their ballots for Democrats or Republicans.

It would automatically register American voters when they get a driver's license; guarantee at least 15 continuous days of early voting; end partisan gerrymandering, and bring transparency to our campaign finance system.

I know my Republican colleagues don't like every aspect of it. Fine. Tell us how you'd change it. Offer good-faith amendments to improve the bill, which the Chair has said she would graciously and eagerly entertain.

But my Republican colleagues:

If you choose the path of uncompromising opposition, you will cast yourselves in league with the most reprehensible, sweeping voter suppression effort in decades.

And that is a legacy-defining choice.