

Senate Witness Testimony

July 19, 2021

José Segarra--Houston County

Good morning Chairwoman Klobuchar and members of the committee. My name is José Segarra and I live in Warner Robins, GA which is in Houston County in central Georgia. Thank you for the opportunity you've given me to express my experience. Voting is sacred to me as a citizen. I believe that Americans have a civic responsibility to elect the best officials who will best serve us and our communities.

I grew up in Puerto Rico and since I was a kid, I saw the importance of doing your due diligence in electing leaders. Voting is a minimal duty that we have as citizens. Voting is the starting point for our rights and responsibilities as Americans.

I first came to Georgia as an US Air Force officer in August 1992. I registered to vote when I moved to Georgia and have been a regular voter in Georgia ever since. I served in the Air Force from 1986 through December 1992 and served during Operation Desert Storm. I now work at Robins Air Force Base.

Voting is sacred to me. That's how I feel about it. The voting process should be as easy as possible for eligible voters and unnecessary voting rules should not restrict people's freedom to vote.

For too many Georgians—and too many Americans—our ability to cast our ballot and have it count is in peril. This past year, I had to go to extraordinary lengths to accomplish the simple but consequential task of casting my ballot. I, along with thousands of Georgians, had to wait for hours in order to cast my vote in the 2020 General Election. In fact, I had to go to the polls twice in order to vote.

As part of doing my civic duty, I made a plan to take my friends who are an elderly couple with me to the polls on the first day of early voting. During the first week of early voting our county only had one early voting location open for its approximately 160,000 residents. The Secretary of State's office establishes the required days for early voting. According to the Secretary of State's Office, early voting for the November 2020 General Election would begin on Monday October 12, but that day was Columbus Day. Houston County chose not to start early voting until the next day, Tuesday October 13. The [Macon Telegraph newspaper](#) reported that Monday October 12, 2020

had record high voter turnout in counties where voting was open, but Houston was one of fifty counties in Georgia that did not have voting that day.

Tuesday morning, we drove from Warner Robins to the Houston County Courthouse in Perry, GA and arrived at 7:15am. Voting began at 8:00am and we thought we arrived with plenty of time to vote quickly and be on our way.

To our surprise, there was already a line around the courthouse, snaking all the way around the block. The line went up the stairs to the entrance of the courthouse. One of my elderly friends is a knee replacement candidate and is diabetic. His wife, who is a retired teacher, has acute arthritis and uses a walker. We were worried about them standing in line and going up the stairs. There was no separate line for people with disabilities or the elderly. We knew that my friends could not sustain waiting in that line, so we left without voting. They ended up voting by mail.

My wife and I went back to early vote on October 27, 2020. This time I was able to go to the Middle Georgia Technical College in Warner Robins, which was open for the last two weeks of early voting. My wife and I arrived around 3:00. We parked the car and got in line outside the main building. My wife had a co-worker who is also from Puerto Rico and was new to Georgia. She registered to vote but had not voted in Georgia before and was confused by the process. We met her at the polling place.

The line went through the parking lot and around the building. We were not protected from the elements as we waited outside. I saw a lot of people come into the parking lot, see the line and then leave. At one point, there were people giving out water bottles. It was uncomfortable to stand and wait so long. I felt bad to see elderly people and pregnant women standing in the line. Some people brought chairs, but many were standing.

Poll workers would come outside and try to be helpful but they did not explain the reason for the lengthy delay. After an hour and a half, we made it inside--finally. Then we had to wait for another hour and a half. There were restrooms inside, but the water fountains were turned off. It was crowded inside. At this point my wife's co-worker who was in line with us became worried because she had to pick up her baby from childcare. She was worried that she would not get there before the childcare center closed. She called her husband from the line to see if he could pick up the baby, but he was at work.

We were still in line when the polling place officially closed at 5:00pm, but we were allowed to remain in line and vote. We ended up casting our ballots at 6:00pm--three hours after we arrived. My wife's co-worker rushed from the polling place to pick up her child in case her husband wasn't able to get there first. We learned later that her husband had to get time off from work and was able to pick up the baby.

I later learned that [Houston County had a median wait time](#) of over an hour for early voting. And, across the state, [some of my fellow Georgians waited up to eight hours to vote](#). Election observers reported that several people fainted while in line in Savannah and Atlanta.

Long lines have disproportionately affected voters of color. Since 2013 when the Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County vs. Holder* resulted in Georgia and other states no longer having to preclear changes to voting regulations, polling locations have been cut statewide by nearly 10%, according to an analysis of state and local records by Georgia Public Broadcasting and ProPublica. At the same time, the voter rolls have grown with much of the growth fueled by younger, nonwhite voters.

I have learned that, between 2012 and 2018, 1,700 polling locations across 13 states were closed causing long lines in many states to worsen ([Leadership Conference](#)). In Georgia, 214 polling locations were closed. Seven counties closed all but one polling location; three out of five of the counties that closed the greatest percentage of polling locations have large populations of voters of color, including Warren County, which closed 83% of its polling locations and whose electorate is 61% Black voters. (Mark Niese, Maya Prabhu, Jacquelyn Elias, [Voting Precincts Closed Across Georgia Since Election Oversight Lifted](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, September 4, 2018).

In part due to these closures, voters in neighborhoods with a majority of people of color have consistently experienced longer wait times than voters in predominantly white communities. (Stephen Fowler, [For Nonwhite Georgia Voters, Numbers Have Soared, as Polling Places Dwindled](#), ProPublica, Georgia Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, October 17, 2020).

This is wrong. It should not take so long to vote. According to The Presidential Commission on Election Administration, no citizen should have to wait more than 30 minutes to vote. (The Presidential Comm'n on Election Admin., [The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration 13](#), 2014). I had to wait six times that measure. I'm fortunate because my job allows me to take time off to vote, and I was able to work from home during the pandemic.

Imagine if I hadn't been so lucky, and I had taken Tuesday off to vote, only to have to turn around and leave. I would have to ask my boss for another day off. It is unacceptable that in Houston, or Cobb County, or Chatham County a person would have to wait half a day or miss a full day of work or two just to exercise their constitutional right.

Our government needs to ensure that we have adequate systems and processes in place to allow every eligible voter to cast their ballot without such undue burdens. I am a very disciplined person and my military background helps me assert my freedom to vote; it should be as easy as possible for eligible voters to vote. To do this, we need to have an adequate number of polling locations and these locations to be properly resourced and open for as expansive a period as possible. Voters should have the opportunity to vote on Saturdays and Sundays. Lots of people work on Saturdays, so Sundays need to be an option. It would also make it much easier for some people to vote if Election Day were a federal holiday.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, I take voting very seriously. I am willing to overcome long lines and last minute polling place changes in order to vote, but it shouldn't be this hard.

I served my country as a member of the armed forces and continue to serve by encouraging voting in my community. I am here to respectfully ask for your help, Senators, in protecting my freedom to vote by passing legislation that will address these unacceptably long lines and ensure that every eligible voter has the opportunity to participate, not just those of us who can take three hours off from work to stand in line and so that nobody has to choose between a paycheck and exercising a much sacred constitutional right.