

Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

U.S. Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock

July 19, 2021

Chair Klobuchar, thank you for inviting me to speak today about the urgent need for federal voting rights legislation. I'm especially grateful that members of the Rules Committee have come here to my home state for its first field hearing in twenty years, and will hear from Georgia advocates like Helen Butler who have long been on-the-ground in this fight and can speak extensively to the detrimental impacts of voter suppression in Georgia.

Over the last year, Georgia has become ground zero for the sweeping voter suppression efforts we've seen gain momentum all across this country.

We saw record-breaking voter turnout in our last elections—participation that should have been celebrated—get attacked by craven politicians. And spurred on by the Big Lie, these same actors are now rolling back voting rights in a way that is unprecedented in size and scope since the Jim Crow era. In fact, Georgia became the first of now 14 states to pass laws that restrict voter turnout in the wake of the November 2020 election.

My home state exemplifies the success of these suppression efforts, as well as the power and opportunity of what federal voting rights legislation can accomplish.

Your vote is your voice, and your voice is your human dignity. And what we're seeing in Georgia is an attempt to deny *certain people* of the ability to have their voices heard in our democracy—not only by denying people access to the ballot, but also the ability to have their voices counted.

This new law in Georgia, SB 202, would make voting harder for countless Georgians:

- By creating new hurdles that voters have to jump through in order to request an absentee ballot while also reducing the number of dropboxes where voters can return those ballots
- By making it harder for community organizations to assist voters, whether from requesting a ballot to just handing out a bottle of water
- By letting a single person make unlimited, mass challenges to the ability of other Georgians to vote, clearing the way for baseless accusations

And even if you clear all of those hurdles, even if you are registered to vote and you've got your ballot in the door, your ballot still might not be counted. Because this new law also allows partisan officials in the state legislature to control our state board of elections and take over local election administrators. And it allows them to engage in these takeovers even as the votes are still being cast.

But if we passed federal voting rights protections, we can reverse these restrictions. We can pass legislation that would create uniform national standards so that your right to vote wouldn't depend on where you live in. We can protect the freedom of voters to decide how they want to vote—whether it's on Election Day, during early voting, or by mail. And we can strengthen election security by providing new funding for states to replace old voting machines and enhance training for election administrators.

Along with Chair Klobuchar, as well as our colleagues and Senators Merkley, Warner, and Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff, I've also introduced the *Preventing Election Subversion Act*. This legislation would address some of the specific challenges we see in Georgia by stopping mass challenges against voters and preventing state takeovers of local election boards.

I want to be clear: Congress must take action on voting rights, and we have no time to spare. Since January, nearly 400 bills that would restrict voting have been introduced in 48 states, and passed in fourteen. And as we speak, the Texas legislature is trying to become the fifteenth state.

We Americans live in a house that democracy built, and right now that house is on fire. And so we have to have national standards that push against what we're seeing in Texas and in Georgia.

And while our brave brothers and sisters in the Texas legislature have risked so much to try to stop this effort, I am disappointed that some members of the United States Senate—known as the greatest deliberative body in the world—could not even bring themselves to open debate on this critical moral issue.

Voting is not like any other issue. Voting rights provide the framework in which are able to have all the other debates, on all the other issues that impact our lives: infrastructure, climate change, health care, you name it. And so Congress has a unique responsibility to protect voting rights for every eligible American.

To put it plainly: we're only able to work on these issues because someone voted to send us to Washington. If we don't protect the voices of the people who sent us to serve, then we've failed to do our job. So I want to be clear that we are only in the beginning of this stretch, and I'm going to keep working in earnest with my Senate colleagues to pass the strongest voting rights legislation possible.

As I conclude my remarks, I want to talk about one of Georgia's proudest sons, the late Congressman John Lewis. He was my parishioner but he will always be my mentor. I've often asked myself what he must have thought as he prepared to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, prepared to risk his life in service of making this democracy live up to its ideals.

John Lewis and so many unnamed others nearly died on that bridge to protect our democracy. His courage is an example to us all, and his legacy lives in each of us but especially in this Committee. Because John Lewis devoted the last decade of his life to creating national standards for voting that laid the groundwork for the legislation we need to pass.

We are in a 911 emergency for our democracy. We are witnessing a shameless, unabashed assault on people's voting rights. And in the face of all that we're seeing in Georgia, and across the country, we must pass federal voting rights legislation—no matter what.