



Statement for League of Women Voters of Georgia

U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration Field Hearing on Protecting the Freedom to Vote: Recent Changes to Georgia Voting Laws and the Need for Basic Federal Standards to Make Sure All Americans Can Vote in the Way that Works Best for Them

July 17, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to share with this committee how Georgians need the basic federal standards proposed in the *For the People Act* to make sure that all Americans can vote in the way that works best for them.

I am the President of the League of Women Voters Georgia (LWVGA). Our 13 local Leagues represent diverse and engaged communities throughout the state. The League of Women Voters was founded over 100 years ago by suffragists who fought for women's right to vote and educated them on the importance of voting. Since 1920, after women earned the right to vote, the League has worked to defend our democracy by working to ensure that everyone understands their right to vote, hopes such knowledge will increase voter's desire to vote, and equips voters with the knowledge, and the confidence to participate.

The League's Work to Reject SB202

Over the last two decades, Georgia has gone from leading the way in making elections free, fair, and accessible for every American, to instituting needless barriers to voting. Despite a dismal history of discrimination at the polls, Georgia was one of the first states to implement the *National Voter Registration Act* and the *Help America Vote Act*. That once promising approach has changed, as Georgia was among the first states to implement restrictive voter photo ID requirements — before the *Shelby v. Holder* decision and despite being subject to preclearance by the Department of Justice.

In 2020, nearly 5 million Georgia voters went to the polls and many of those voters represented racial or language minorities and new citizens. The *Voting Rights Act* guaranteed those citizens a voice in our government. Yet, even with years of progress behind us, voters in Gwinnett, and other metro Atlanta precincts continued to face obstacles to the ballot box, with some waiting at least 4 hours to cast their vote.

Fast forward to 2021, with the passage of SB 202, the Georgia legislature has violated the very mission we have fought for more than a century to ensure: that every American has the right to participate in our government. The omnibus, voter suppression legislation disproportionately targets the voting rights of Black and brown Georgians as well as older voters and the disabled, in violation of the U.S. Constitution and the *Voting Rights Act*.

As an organization, LWVGA has fought SB 202 since it was introduced, and we continue to fight it with ongoing litigation. This bill deliberately targets Black, Latinx, Asian American, Indigenous, and



other voters of color in a direct attempt to eliminate the historic voting rights gains between 1965 and 2020. It is a disgraceful attempt by legislators to disenfranchise voters and choose whose vote is protected. Such stifling of the constitutional right to vote is undemocratic, unconstitutional, and undermines the vary values that make America the beacon of freedom.

SB 202 makes cuts to several important mechanisms increasingly used by Black and brown voters. Specifically, the bill restricts early voting, absentee ballots, and ballot drop boxes, and implements unnecessary ID requirements for absentee ballots that make it harder for Georgians to vote. This bill directly threatens the work of the League of Women Voters and our partners with fines and misdemeanor charges for assisting voters with their absentee ballots. The League has helped millions of voters understand what is on their ballot and offered support to voters who needed it. The legislation was an assault on democracy.

Specific Impact on Georgians

The League of Women Voters of Georgia has tremendous reach which allows us to connect directly with voters that this law directly effects. For example, Shannon B. a League member in Dalton, Georgia, has voted absentee in Georgia over the years, including as a member of the military, a college student, and because of work, travel, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Shannon prefers absentee voting because it allows her to vote alongside her disabled mother. By voting in this manner with her mom, she can clarify items on the ballot and take time to consider their ballots together. Shannon is concerned that the time limit that SB 202 puts on receiving absentee ballots is problematic. Further delays caused by the recent changes at the United States Postal Service also make her nervous that she and her mother's votes will not be counted if it fails to be received by the election office on time, or worse, if the ballot lost in the mail altogether. For Shannon, drop-boxes are an excellent solution to this concern. Using a drop box to return her household's ballots gives her peace of mind and ensures that ballots will be received and counted. But provisions in SB 202 which would limit the hours drop-boxes are open and would make it difficult for Shannon and her mother to vote. Her commute time traveling to work during the week prevents Shannon from getting to the Board of Elections during business hours. Thus, she will be unable to place her ballot in the drop-box. 24/7 access to the drop box, even on the weekends, is highly beneficial to ensuring their ballots are received.

Shannon has also helped her elderly neighbor to vote in recent elections. Her neighbor does not drive and is not comfortable navigating websites, email, or the internet. She previously did not possess the proper ID to vote, and had been purged from voting rolls because of lack of participation in past elections due largely to her limited mobility. Shannon helped the neighbor get proper ID and become registered to vote. Without this support, her neighbor would not have been allowed to vote. Not everyone has a neighbor or a family member like Shannon who is willing or able to help in the voting process. New ID rules in SB 202 will continue to make it more difficult for people like Shannon's neighbor to request and return an absentee ballot without assistance.

Long lines in GA have been a source of frustration for Georgia voters for several election cycles. Nina A. from Savannah, Georgia, remembers meeting with a mother in line who was pulling a wagon with her sleeping 18-month-old inside, along with some snacks. Even though the mother had arrived at the polling location on the only Saturday of early voting upon opening, it was



crowded. She was forced to wait in line for hours while her baby slept in the wagon beside her, worried that she would be unable to vote before the child woke up. SB 202 prohibits anyone but poll workers from handing out water to those waiting in line. In the case of this mother, it is very likely that she would need assistance from friends or community members if her child had woken up. Thus, she would need food, diapers, or other supplies to care for them. Under the new law, she would be prohibited from seeking the assistance she would need to vote. Ultimately, this provision of SB202 discriminates against new mothers and other caretakers who vote.

While we have taken the time to highlight how this bill poses barriers for two voters, as reported by Shannon and Nina, their stories represent the needs of thousands of voters. The tremendous voter participation in the 2020 election was the culmination of decades of work by grassroots organizers and voting rights advocates. Our states should build on the success of 2020's historic voter turnout, but instead we are seeing a return to the era of Jim Crow laws. The people of Georgia deserve better. The American voters deserve better.

The 2020 election saw the greatest voter participation in history, with Georgia seeing an increase in both registration numbers and voter participation—especially among Black Georgians and other communities of color as well as young voters. The provisions in SB 202 would not only eliminate Georgia's growth in voter participation, but it would take voting rights backward in the state, particularly for voters of color, who are undeniably targeted by the bill. For instance, SB 202 allows country registrars to eliminate Sunday early voting hours, used by many Black and brown churches and faith groups to deliver community members to the polls.

The best tool to counter these denials of the freedom to vote is the *For the People Act*.

The *For the People Act* will enact national standards of voting rights, accessibility, and democratic reform to combat anti-voter laws experienced by Georgians. These standards will set a baseline for how our elections are implemented and safeguard our voting rights. The *For the People Act* would prevent increased barriers to voting by creating a mechanism to tackle the anti-voter laws that have already passed. In addition, the standards set by the *For the People Act* can be used in a variety of actions that democracy advocates propose to repeal unjust barriers to voting.

The *For the People Act* goes a long way to put the power back into the hands of the voters.

If we want the reality of American democracy to truly live up to its promise, we must implement the reforms within the bill. These reforms already have widespread bipartisan support across the country and will help all Americans have access to the ballot.

The *For the People Act* is the fair representation bill that the American people want and deserve. The fight for these reforms has been long and hard, but this vote will test the government's commitment to American democracy.

It is the duty of our government to protect the rights of voters and to encourage participation in our political system, not create barriers that prevent involvement. As it has for more than 100 years, the League looks forward to holding our elected leaders accountable for protecting and upholding their responsibility to ensure voters have the unobstructed ability to exercise their right to vote.



The League of Women Voters of Georgia urges the U.S. Senate to pass the *For the People Act*, for Georgia, for America.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the needs of Georgians and why the *For the People Act* is critical to protecting the right to vote of Georgians and all Americans in states facing similar laws that present barriers to the ballot box.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Susannah E. Scott', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Susannah E. Scott, Esq.
President, League of Women Voters of Georgia