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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney

Hearing on “Voter Suppression in Minority Communities: Learning from the Past to Protect Our Future”

February 26, 2020

Good morning. Today, we are examining our nation’s history of voter suppression—as well as the obstacles that many minority communities continue to face to this day in exercising their fundamental right to vote.

Tomorrow, we will be holding a ceremony to honor our dear friend, our colleague, and our former Chairman, Elijah Cummings. We will be renaming this hearing room after him and commending everything he stood for. Today’s hearing is also part of our efforts to honor his legacy. Protecting the right to vote was one of the most important issues, if not the most important issue, he fought for during his decades in public service.

We are holding this hearing in February—during Black History Month. It was Black Americans whose voices were stifled, blocked, and silenced for centuries. And it is Black Americans who are still being disproportionately targeted even now in shameful efforts to prevent them from registering to vote, purging their names from the voter rolls, and making it harder for them to exercise their rights under the Constitution.

Last February, Chairman Cummings held a similar hearing—one of the very first he called after becoming Chairman of this Committee—and he explained his vision for our work. I would like to play a clip from that hearing now:

“I believe that we should be doing everything in our power to make it easier for eligible American citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote—not harder. We should be making it more convenient—not less. We should be encouraging more people to cast their votes—not fewer. We should be promoting early voting, absentee voting, voting by mail, and other ways to help citizens cast their votes—not rolling back these programs.”]

That is a North Star that everyone in this nation should agree with.

On this date 151 years ago, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, declaring that the right of citizens to vote shall not be denied on account of race. That was the beginning of a long and deadly struggle to ensure that all American citizens can cast their votes.

This year is also the 55th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the 55th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” when hundreds of peaceful civil rights marchers were beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The efforts of civil rights pioneers—some of whom are here with us today—helped millions of Americans exercise their right to vote.

Unfortunately, today, many states are attacking the right to vote using tactics similar to those that civil rights pioneers battled for decades.

Last year, under Chairman Cummings’ leadership, the Committee launched an investigation of allegations in three key states: Georgia, Texas, and Kansas. Today, we are releasing some of the documents and information we obtained as part of that investigation.

For example, in Georgia, Secretary of State Brian Kemp purged more than half a million voters from the rolls and blocked the registrations of thousands more—all while running for Governor. Emails obtained by the Committee show that Mr. Kemp and a top campaign aide congratulated each other for confusing the public about their illegal voter roll purges. They also gleefully celebrated as they made it harder for hundreds of thousands of people to vote. They even used laughing and smiling emojis in a sickening display of derision.

We also examined Texas, which threatened thousands of innocent Americans with criminal prosecution for voting illegally, only to be forced to reverse course when it was revealed that many—if not all—were U.S. citizens with every right to cast their ballots.

Finally, we examined Kansas, which moved the one and only polling site in the entire city of Dodge City, Kansas, outside the city limits, without even bothering to consult with the local voters. Dodge City has a population of more than 25,000—and they consist predominantly of minorities.

Unfortunately, these are not the only instances of discriminatory voter suppression. For example, North Carolina passed an extremely restrictive voter ID law, but the Fourth Circuit struck it down, ruling that it would “target African Americans with almost surgical precision.”

These abuses must end, and the House of Representatives has taken action to stop them. Last year, the House passed two landmark bills to protect voting rights.

- H.R. 1, the For the People Act, would reduce barriers to voting through automatic registration, same-day registration and expanded early voting.
- H.R. 4 would restore and modernize the Voting Right Act to protect against discriminatory voting practices.

Unfortunately, Senator Mitch McConnell has refused for months to allow the Senate to vote on these bills. Communities across America need to mobilize now to protect the right to vote in the upcoming election. Every American can take action today to make sure their voter registration is active, to learn about their options for early or absentee voting in their states, and to find their polling sites.

I would like to close where I began, at our hearing a year ago last February. During that hearing, Chairman Cummings told the story about how he sat with his mother on her death bed, and this is what she said to him. I would like to play that clip now:

["On my mother's dying bed, 92 years old, former sharecropper, her last words were, 'Do not let them take our votes away from us.' She had fought and seen people harmed, beaten, trying to vote. Talk about inalienable rights. Voting is crucial. And I don't give a damn how you look at it: There are efforts to stop people from voting. That's not right. This is not Russia. This is the United States of America."]

Like his mother, Chairman Cummings has now passed on. But his spirit is still here with us—in this very hearing room—as he urges us with moral clarity to protect and defend the core of our democracy.

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