

Republican voter suppression bills advance as Democrats promote illusions in Congress

Alex Findijs
1 April 2021

The signing of Georgia's voter suppression law has sparked controversy and outrage across the United States. However, despite facing one of the greatest assaults on voting rights since the dismantling of Jim Crow in the 1960s, the Democratic Party has made little effort to mobilize popular opposition to the law.

A protest by state representative Park Cannon, who was arrested last Thursday by state troopers for knocking on the governor's door as he was announcing that he had signed the bill, drew a few dozen attendees. A protest in front of Atlanta City Hall on Saturday, organized by The People's Uprising, drew a crowd of a little over 100 people.

Instead of mobilizing the working class to oppose this law and similar legislation in dozens of states, the Democratic Party is focusing its efforts on court suits and the passage of H.R.1, federal legislation that would override some of the state bills. A few days after the Georgia bill was signed into law, three voter advocacy organizations filed a lawsuit challenging it.

New Georgia Project, founded by Democratic politician Stacey Abrams, Black Voters Matter Fund, and Rise, a student voting group, have filed a joint lawsuit against the law. The lawsuit argues that the bill violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits the restriction of voting rights based on race, as well as the First and 14th Amendments, by creating an undue burden on the right to vote.

A second lawsuit was filed on Sunday by the Georgia chapter of the NAACP, the Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, The League of Women Voters Georgia, GALEO Latino Community Development Fund, Common Cause and the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe.

While these suits wait to be heard, additional voter suppression bills are progressing through state governments throughout the United States.

Last Tuesday, Iowa enacted a law that imposes a host of restrictions on voting. It reduces the time that polls are open until from 9 p.m. to 8 p.m.—a small but potentially significant change—and also cuts the number of early voting days from 29 to 20. Additionally, the law restricts local election officials from establishing additional early voting sites unless petitioned to do so.

Like many similar laws, Iowa's bill also targets mail-in voting. Prior to the new law, mail-in ballots needed only to be postmarked by the day before the election. The new regulations require that mail-in ballots arrive before polls close on election day. It makes it a misdemeanor for any person, other than an immediate family member, to handle an absentee ballot, whereas any person designated by the voter could do so under prior legislation. Local election officials may also not mail absentee ballots to voters unless they specifically request it.

An even more restrictive bill was advanced out of committee in the Texas Senate on Friday. If made law, this bill would prohibit drive-thru voting, further restrict early voting days, allow partisan poll watchers to record voters who receive assistance with casting their ballot, and forbid local election officials from encouraging voters to request an absentee ballot, even if they are eligible.

A particularly restrictive part of the bill would require disabled voters who request an absentee ballot to provide proof of their disability from a doctor, in what is essentially a poll tax.

The Florida Senate is also currently reviewing a bill that would include attacks on mail-in voting and voter registration. The bill would reduce the validity of an absentee ballot request from two election cycles to one, requiring voters to reapply every two years. In Miami-Dade County alone this change would affect 400,000 out of the county's 1.5 million voters. The bill would also ban any person other than an immediate family member from handling an absentee ballot, on the threat of a misdemeanor charge, and would require that all mail-in ballots arrive by 7 p.m. on election day.

All three of these states have full Republican control over the legislative process, but in Michigan the Republican legislature is attempting to circumvent Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer to impose voter restrictions. The Republican plan is to blend the House and Senate versions of a voter suppression bill and launch a petition drive. If the Republican Party gathers 340,000 signatures, Michigan law would allow the Republican legislature to pass the bill into law without the signature of the governor.

Ron Weiser, chair of the Michigan Republican Party—who has been quoted calling the top three Democrats in the state “witches” who need to get ready “for the burning at the stake”—said that if the bill was not passed into law that Republicans “have other plans to make sure that it becomes law before 2022.”

The response of the Democratic Party to these assaults on democratic rights has been to promote their extensive election bill, H.R.1, also known as the For the People Act. Now under review by the Senate, if passed the bill would enact several major changes to US election law.

The 600-page bill would establish automatic voter registration, restore the right to vote for those with past criminal convictions, require states to provide two weeks of early voting and drop boxes for absentee ballots, and introduce reforms to campaign finance law and gerrymandering.

Many of these provisions have been, in general, popular reforms for years, especially changes to campaign finance laws. However, deeper examination shows that the law is designed to appease popular demands without actually meeting many of them.

For campaign finance, the law would enact some changes as to how campaign financing is reported to the public, targeting the “dark money” in American politics flowing through political action committees (PACs).

However, it would not actually impose any substantial restrictions on wealthy donors, whose largest inconvenience from this bill would be having to report, under certain conditions, what political organizations they donate to.

The provisions for gerrymandering, the process of drawing congressional districts with a partisan bias, are also questionable. The bill includes provisions to keep communities together (gerrymandered districts often split cities into multiple districts to separate voters), but the bill only provides that states must “minimize” the division of communities.

The bill would also ostensibly prevent politically motivated redistricting by requiring states to establish independent commissions to oversee the redistricting process for congressional districts (the gerrymandering of state legislative districts, which is even more widespread, is not subject to federal legislation).

Both parties have engaged in gerrymandering for decades, but the Republican Party has been more effective in the recent period, because it has controlled more state legislatures. A major purpose of the Democratic bill is to eke out a few more seats in the House of Representatives in Republican-controlled states like North Carolina, Ohio and Texas.

The wider concerns of the Democrats are best exemplified through the bill’s section on countering foreign interference. Doubling down on the Democratic Party’s anti-Russia campaign, the bill uses the claim of Russian interference in the 2016 election to justify clamping down on free speech online.

H.R.1 would require online platforms with at least 50 million users to create a database of all requests for political advertisements, including a copy of the ad, the ad’s targeted audience and number of views, the rate charged for the ad, and the purchaser of the ad. Such a provision could be used to keep files on third-party, independent and socialist political candidates and organizations, potentially being used to censor such groups from purchasing political advertisements on social media.

The bill would also require political committees to notify the FBI of any connections with foreign political parties. The FBI would have to submit an annual report to Congress on the connections between political committees and foreign contacts. This section could be used to justify federal surveillance of any political organization with foreign contacts, including socialist and antiwar groups.

Regardless of the contents of the bill, it is not currently expected to pass the Senate. Without ending the filibuster the Democratic Party will need 60 votes to pass the bill. West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, a conservative Democrat now regarded as the “swing vote” on such legislation, has publicly expressed preference for bipartisan negotiation.

Last week, Manchin claimed that passing H.R.1 without Republican support would spark further events like the coup on January 6. According to Manchin, existing distrust in the voting process, cultivated by the Republican Party’s lie that the election was stolen from Donald Trump, would only be exacerbated by expanding voting rights.

“We had an insurrection, Jan. 6, because of voting, right?” said Manchin, warning that Congress “should not at all attempt to do anything that will create more distrust [in elections].”

This is a cowardly and false perspective. The January 6 coup was not some misguided protest spontaneously organized over mistrust in mail-in voting. It was actively organized by fascist militias and elements within the Republican Party, fueled by the former President’s fascistic and false rantings about a rigged election. Manchin is attempting to downplay the significance of the fascist insurrection and cover for his Republican colleagues, whose approval he values more than the crumbling democratic institutions of the United States.

Georgia Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock offered more support to passing the bill during his rounds on Sunday morning talk shows, but he too refused to commit to ending the filibuster. Speaking on CNN, he said of Republicans that “the ball is in their court. They could vote the bill up. But if they don’t, we have to pass voting rights no matter what.”

This language is purposely ambiguous. “No matter what” could mean anything from abolishing the filibuster to gutting the bill of major provisions in order to win a handful of Republican votes.

The Democratic Party cannot be entrusted with the defense of democratic rights. Even under threat by Republican bills targeting Democratic voters, the party has no solution to offer other than legal challenges and the promise of a voting rights bill destined to die in the Senate.

Instead of calling out mass protests to oppose the Georgia voter suppression law, the Democrats are channeling social opposition behind their own electoral ambitions.

Democratic Party-aligned voting rights organizations are also playing their role in this cynical diffusion of mass anger. Voter advocacy groups have rallied around calls for a boycott of Coca-Cola, in the futile hope that they can pressure the international conglomerate to influence the Georgia government after the bill has already passed. The Democratic Party is only concerned with protecting its electoral competitiveness and ensuring that popular opposition to voter suppression does not emerge outside its political control.

During the civil rights movement it was only the mass upsurge of working class opposition to segregation and racism that forced parts of the Democratic and Republican establishment to concede the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. This period of reform is long past. There has been a sharp turn to the right in the political establishment as the capitalist system moved to retract the concessions granted in the previous years of bitter class struggle.

No part of the capitalist state, especially its political parties, can be trusted to lead the fight for democratic rights. It has been the Democratic Party in particular that has led the most vicious attacks against third party and socialist candidates. This was demonstrated when the Democratic Party in states across the country prevented the Socialist Equality Party and the Green Party from appearing on the ballot for the 2020 presidential election.

In order to protect and expand the democratic rights of all people, the working class must break free of the confines of the two major capitalist parties and build an independent mass movement in the fight for socialism.



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