

Biden gives lip service to voting rights in Atlanta as legislation remains stalled in Senate

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President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris gave speeches Tuesday in Georgia calling on Congress to pass voting rights reform. The speech came after a year of extensive efforts by Republicans at the state level to enact laws restricting access to the ballot and extend partisan control over the electoral process.

Fueled by the false claims of Trump and leading Republicans that the 2020 election was fraudulent, Republican law makers have introduced a barrage of restrictive voting bills. Throughout 2021 there were at least 440 restrictive bills introduced in 49 states. Of those, 34 were signed into law in 19 states.

The laws range extensively in their attacks on voting rights. Many restrict the ability of voters to acquire and cast mail-in ballots, impose new voter ID requirements, and introduce changes to voter registration procedures that could block thousands of people from casting ballots.

In Georgia, one of the first states to pass restrictive legislation, Senate Bill 202 reduces voting hours, restricts mail-in ballot access, imposes voter ID requirements, and notoriously outlaws the distribution of food and water to voters waiting in line at the polls.

Most significantly, however, the law creates a system whereby the Republican-dominated State Election Board may replace local election officials with partisan appointees, effectively granting the Republican Party the authority to seize control of the electoral process.

Just months after passing the law, the Georgia State Election Board utilized its new power to move towards replacing the local election board of Fulton County (Atlanta), a Democratic stronghold in the state. If the State Election Board is successful, it would be able to appoint a partisan superintendent capable of

manipulating the electoral process in the favor of Republican candidates.

In Texas, Senate Bill 8 imposes similar restrictions on ballot access with additional provisions which make it easier for partisan poll watchers to intimidate election officials and voters. In particular, it imposes heavy fines and potential jail time on any election worker found to have impeded the activities of a poll watcher.

Despite the serious threats to voting rights, Senate Democrats have failed several times last fall to pass two voting reform bills—the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

With a narrow Democratic majority based on the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Harris in the 50-50 Senate, the Democrats cannot bring the bills to a vote on the Senate floor. Republicans have filibustered the bills, which lack the 60 votes required to force a vote.

The filibuster, which allows a Senate minority to delay or prevent the voting on a bill, is neither part of the Constitution nor of any law. It is a longstanding custom spelled out each year in the rules adopted by the Senate itself.

The Democratic Party could alter the filibuster at any time with its majority of 51 votes in the Senate. However, the right-wing Democratic Senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema have strongly opposed any alterations to the filibuster, arguing that the voting reform bills must receive support from the Republican Party to pass.

Several other Democrats have indicated their opposition to any change in the filibuster, and President Biden took the same position throughout last year, but his tune has changed in recent weeks.

In his speech in Atlanta yesterday, Biden called for

changes to the filibuster rule, stating that the Senate should “[get] rid of the filibuster” voting rights legislation. However, Biden also stated that he favored a return to the “talking filibuster,” in which a minority may still block a vote by holding the floor long enough to expire a legislative session. Continuous physical presence and speaking are required, not just 41 votes.

This caveat to Biden’s statements is an expression of the utter fecklessness of the Democratic Party in the face of concerted assaults on voting rights and bourgeois democracy.

Ever since the passage of the Georgia voting law the Democrats have consistently avoided any real attempt to defend democratic rights. Instead of passing federal legislation to stop the voting restrictions, the Democratic Party called on corporations to “pressure” the Georgia Republicans into repealing their own law.

The failure of the Democratic Party to produce any change in voting rights has fostered frustration among voting rights groups in Georgia, who announced that they would be boycotting Biden’s speech earlier in the week.

A Georgia voting rights activist who spoke with NBC News expressed that frustration, saying, “They’re coming to this very late. I think they’ve been sucked into caring about this rather than having had an affirmative strategy around this from the start.. . Even after Jan. 6, they continued to think of this as a second-tier set of issues.”

Cliff Albright, co-founder of the Black Voters Matter Fund, told CNN “We don’t need another speech. We don’t need him to come to Georgia and use us as a prop. What we need is work.”

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Democratic Party has abandoned the defense of democratic rights, only now returning to the issue after the failure of Biden to pass his Build Back Better spending bill and the one-year anniversary of the January 6 coup attempt.

Throughout his speech Biden refused to name Trump or his Republican supporters in his condemnation of the January 6 insurrection. While he acknowledged that it was a coup attempt based on a lie of electoral fraud, he continued with the evasive language of his speech on January 6, referring to Trump only as the “defeated former president” and refusing to name his co-conspirators in the Republican Party.

This is in line with Biden’s insistence that that there

must be a “strong Republican Party,” which he cleared of all responsibility for the coup, instead framing it as solely the fault of Trump as an individual.

He claimed that Republicans did not have “the strength to stand up to Trump,” as if the Republican Party were an unfortunate hostage of Trump’s power grab, and not a willing participant.

Biden’s inability to publicly recognize the threat of fascism within the Republican Party demonstrates and the Democratic Party’s complicity in the destruction of democratic rights. His most cowardly statement came when he said “don’t let the Republican Party turn into something else.”

This “something else” that Biden is referring to is the transformation of the Republican Party into an openly fascistic political party. Biden will not name the threat clearly because he and the Democratic Party are afraid of the social forces they might unleash within the working class if they were to approach the situation with any real level of seriousness.

The Democratic Party, one of the oldest capitalist political parties in the world, fears this outcome far more than it fears the rise of fascism. It would rather sacrifice democratic rights at the altar of profit than allow the working class to take control of the defense of its own rights.

Biden’s speech is another in a long line of empty statements and platitudes which will likely result in another failed attempt to pass voting reform. Upon another failure, the Democrats will either capitulate to the Republicans and strip the bills of any substance, or use them as an electoral promise in this year’s midterm elections, issuing an empty promise to pass electoral reform in 2023.



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