

Chairwoman Klobuchar Opening Statement July 19, 2021

Good morning. It is my honor to call to order this hearing of the United States Senate Committee on Rules and Administration -- the first field hearing that the Senate Rules Committee has held in over 20 years. And I can't actually think of a better place to hold it than in this beautiful, beautiful museum.

We are here today in Atlanta to shine a spotlight on what has been happening in Georgia and in states around the country to undermine the freedom to vote. Over 400 bills have been introduced, 28 have been passed and signed into law, and exhibit A is the one right here in the state of Georgia. We are here to listen to people in Georgia about the changes to the state's voting laws -- and we are here to discuss why it is so critical for Congress to enact basic federal standards to ensure that all Americans can cast their ballots.

I would like to thank my colleagues who are in attendance: of course, Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock, I got the privilege to attend Ebenezer with him yesterday, and also Senator Ossoff, who, of course, was also recently elected and is a leader on this Committee and of course -- okay, alright, we'll cheer for both Georgia senators right now! Thank you. And also with us today is Senator Merkley, from the state of Oregon, who is the lead author of the For the People Act. And last but not least, Senator Padilla, who many of you know was the Secretary of State of California -- incredibly knowledgeable in the area of voting rights and took a red eye to get here today, so that is a long way from California.

I'd also like to welcome the following leaders from the state of Georgia who are here with us today:

- Georgia Rep. Billy Mitchell, who will also give a statement, who is the Chair of the Georgia House Democratic Caucus and the President of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators;
- Chair of the Georgia Black Caucus of State Legislators, Senator Tonya Anderson, who I had the privilege to talk to yesterday;
- Representative Debra Bazemore, who's with us as well;
- Representative Rhonda Burnough;
- Representative Sandra Scott; and
- And former Representative Cleo Washington.

In addition, I want to welcome our witnesses. Senator Sally Harrell, right here, she wore the right color, matching with me. Ms. Helen Butler, well known to the community. And Mr. Jose Segarra, who I will introduce shortly. I want to thank Senator Blunt's staff who are here with us as well.

The location of today's hearing, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, is a powerful reminder of how our country has long fought against the forces of injustice -- and that it has only been through the power of citizens standing up to the forces of oppression, through speaking truth to power, that change has occurred.

This morning, we had the opportunity to tour the exhibits, and anyone watching today I really urge you to come to this museum in Atlanta and tour this museum. You literally can sit at the lunch counter where the freedom fighters sat and have headphones on and picture yourself in that position and how long can you sit there, how long can you tolerate it.

There's another exhibit honoring Georgia's own hero, Representative John Lewis, who passed away just over one year ago -- who never gave up on justice, never stopped marching toward freedom.

I have always been in awe of Congressman John Lewis — of his persistence, his resilience, his faith that this country could be better, if only we put in the work.

His faith in our country led him to coordinate efforts for the "Mississippi Freedom Summer," recruiting college students from around the country to join the movement to register Black voters in the South. And it took him to Selma, where he helped lead 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that dark day that became known as Bloody Sunday. The horrific events of that day shocked the nation, with marchers attacked with billy clubs and tear gas. Congressman Lewis's skull was fractured. He bore the scars until the very end of his life.

Soon after, President Lyndon Johnson came to the Capitol, and -- as he said, "with the outrage of Selma still fresh" -- called on Congress to take action to guarantee the right to vote. Months later, with the help of former Minnesota Senator and Vice President Hubert Humphrey, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law.

I was fortunate, like every single senator up here, at points in my life to visit that bridge. And one in particular stands out for me. It was actually the 48th anniversary. That weekend, after 48 years, the white police chief of Montgomery handed his badge to Congressman Lewis and apologized for not protecting him and the Freedom Marchers.

48 years is a long time for an apology, and it only happened because Congressman Lewis never quit fighting for progress, for civil rights, for economic justice.

But now -- over five decades since that day in Selma and since the Voting Rights Act became the law of the land -- so much of the progress that Americans have fought for, that are documented in this museum, that Americans have died for -- is at stake.

It is no coincidence that this assault on the freedom to vote is happening just after the 2020 election, when nearly 160 million Americans cast a ballot -- more than ever before in the middle

of a pandemic, in an election the Trump Department of Homeland Security declared the most secure in history.

This year alone, as I noted, hundreds of hundreds of bills have been introduced. That is why we are here.

We are here in one of the states today where legislation was signed into law by Georgia's Governor in March. The new Georgia law not only limits the number and availability of ballot drop boxes and puts limits on hours of early voting, it also strips power away from local election officials and ultimately puts it in the hands of the state legislature. Something that Reverend Senator Warnock has introduced a bill to change.

This new law also reduces the time for runoff elections from nine weeks to 28 days -- and since Georgia law requires voters to be registered for at least 29 days before the Election Day, this means that previously unregistered voters won't be able to make their voices heard in the runoffs. Do you think it's a coincidence that it's 28 days for the runoff and then 29 days when you register? It's not one bit a coincidence. It is a blatant exercise of raw power.

It also limits early voting for runoffs to one week, Monday through Friday, so you can't vote on weekends; allows a single person to challenge the registration of an unlimited number of voters; and makes it a crime for volunteers to give food and water on a non-partisan basis to people in line.

With similar bills now being considered in state legislatures across America or signed into law already, this is a coordinated effort to limit Americans' freedom to vote.

Our Constitution -- in Article I, Section 4 -- has equipped us to do exactly what we should do. That provision makes clear that Congress has the power to "make or alter" laws governing federal elections "at any time." It is as clear as day.

We must meet this moment. As President Biden said in Philadelphia last week, this is the "test of our time."

That is why we are here to hear firsthand about the attack on voting rights in Georgia, why we must pass the For the People Act, which we're all co-sponsors, of which Senator Merkley is the chief sponsor. This would create those basic federal voting rights that are allowed for by our Constitution, that were clearly anticipated in our Constitution, as well as cut down on the dark money in our politics and do something about ethics reform.

With that, it is my honor to introduce our first witness and your Senator, Reverend Raphael Warnock of Georgia.

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