



Office of the Secretary of State

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Members of the committee. Thank you for having me here today.

I am here today to sound the alarm over an all too common willingness to spread disinformation about elections and election laws for partisan gain.

Since November 3, I and members of my office had repeatedly emphasized the damage that this free for all assault on voter confidence in elections does to this most basic and fundamental democratic institution. Without confidence in the vote, our democracy will be heading down a dangerous path.

Even before the November election, I found myself defending Georgia's voting system from misinformation. In the months after November, we were lionized by media outlets and praised by individuals on the left for our willingness to stand up for truth in the face of unprecedented pressure. I myself was an early supporter of the president during the 2016 election. I am a strong believer in small government and the idea that government is best, when it gets out of the way. But there was just no credibility to the claims about widespread fraud in the November election, so we let the truth be our guide.

Because you believed me after November, I ask that you believe me again now. I told the truth then when it was politically inconvenient for me and I am telling it now, even if it may be politically inconvenient for some of you.

The attack on the integrity of our elections is doing damage that may not be undone. We've seen this firsthand in Georgia.

Though it differed in scale, many of the claims and allegations we heard in recent months echoed almost word for word those we heard from Stacey Abrams and her allies after the November 2018 election. A stolen election. Machines switching or erasing votes. Calls for major reforms after their losses. Numerous lawsuits which have devolved into nothing of substance. Abrams told her supporters Republicans were "domestic enemies" and said she was at "war." She claimed voter suppression. She had no proof or credible evidence. Only salacious allegations.

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We are seeing that spirit at play here today as well. Long before the recent election bill was passed, critics had already decided to call it Jim Crow in a suit and tie. The President referred to it as Jim Crow on steroids and condemned a part of the bill that did not exist. The Senator from Georgia who preceded me on the earlier panel sent out a fundraising email falsely claiming the new bill eliminated no-excuse absentee voting.

And these lies – and I call them lies because that is the most accurate description – are doing real damage to Georgians. As a result, the MLB pulled out of a state with large Black population and moved to a state with a miniscule Black population supposedly to help Black Americans. That is \$100 million that Georgia will never get back. The President called for it. And the Big Lie about Georgia's election bill made it possible.

Which brings us to the reason for this bill. Many have alleged that the motivation for this bill was the claims of voter fraud in Georgia. In 2019, after Stacey Abrams spread her own big lie about the 2018 election, Georgia overhauled its entire system. We went from an all-digital system to a paper-ballot one, buying new equipment for every county. Those paper-ballots proved crucial for upholding confidence in the election. The 2019 overhaul also added a cure period for absentee ballots and simplified the absentee ballot envelopes to minimize issues.

It should not be a surprise then that election legislation would follow a controversial election like the one we saw in November. Georgia saw major increases in the number of complaints about alleged election violations, a trend that continued through the January runoffs. Georgia saw an unprecedented surge in reports of electioneering near polling locations, concerns about voter fraud, and absentee ballot fraud in particular. We saw an increase in allegations of vote buying, multiple complaints about people getting more than one ballot, people complained that ballots were sent to the wrong address, and a larger number of in-person voters being told they had requested an absentee ballot when they arrived at the polls though they claimed they had never done so.

Through all this, voter confidence in the election was significantly undermined and it required action, much as it had after the November 2018 election. A January 2019 poll showed 85% of Georgia Democrats felt that obstacles to voting or problems with voting machines affected the outcome of the 2018 election. A January 2021 poll found that 76% of Georgia Republicans thought there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election.

The bottom line is that this bill expands access to the ballot. We increase the number of required early voting days from 16 to 17 and codify two optional Sunday voting days into law. The bill makes the standard early voting day 9pm to 5pm, with the option to increase those hours to 7am to 7pm. Previous law said early voting only had to be during business hours so small counties with part-time elections offices would often provide a smaller window for their voters to cast ballots. It cuts down on long lines by requiring counties with long waits to split up precincts or add more voting equipment. This is crucial because even under COVID-19, the vast majority of voters chose to cast their ballot in-person. In-person voting in Georgia is not going away any time soon.

The switch to photo ID numbers for absentee ballots harmonizes in-person voting with absentee ballot voting and, more importantly, moves Georgia from the subjective signature match system to an objective system. 99.9% of Georgia voters have a driver's license, valid state voter ID, or Social Security number. The remaining nine thousand can choose from other options like a utility bill or a bank statement as proof of identity.

The day before the bill passed, absentee ballot drop boxes were illegal in Georgia. They had been authorized on an emergency basis by the State Election Board to accommodate the absentee ballot voting surge in 2020, but that authorization had expired. The new formula requires every county to have a drop box, adding them to 35 counties that did not have in November.

Now all Georgians can enjoy a minimum 17 days of early voting including two required Saturdays, no-excuse absentee ballot voting, and Election Day voting. Voters in every county will have access to a drop box and will encounter shorter lines on Election Day. Voters who cast their ballot by mail don't have to worry that their signature changed over time and therefore would be rejected.

While I don't love every part of this bill, it is no return to Jim Crow by any stretch of the imagination. The comparison is insulting, morally wrong, and factually incorrect.

We saw on January 6 how lies have consequences. I urge everyone on both sides of the aisle to remember that lesson going forward.