

Impacts of Voter Suppression Measures on Georgia's Black Voters

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Introduction

Since taking control of the Georgia state government in 2005, Republicans reduced polling stations in metro Atlanta even as the number of Georgia voters increased by almost 2 million, resulting in longer voting lines in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Fowler, 2020). In addition, the state instituted stricter voter photo identification (ID) requirements in 2005 (Georgia Secretary of State, 2021), a problem since Black voters are less likely than other voters to hold a valid driver's license to enable voting (Hood & Bullock, 2012).¹ Despite this, according to Pew Research, “as a share of eligible voters in the state overall, Black voters saw a 5 percentage point increase between 2000 and 2019... the highest growth rate of any racial or ethnic group in Georgia,” (Budiman & Noe-Bustamante, 2020)² and combined with Black Georgians’ long standing support for the Democratic party (Pew Research Center, 2020),³ Democrats were able to win control of the Senate and the Presidency. The question then becomes, are the voting rights of Black Atlantans threatened by these changes or does recent evidence of rising political power refute claims of the state's voter suppression?

Voter Participation Challenges

The implementation of voter suppression laws, specifically voter ID laws, disproportionately impact individual Black voters in the Atlanta Metro area and across the country. A 2005 Indiana photo ID law forces voters to display a government photo ID (often driver’s license or passport), which must include a name, photo, and be up-to-date (State of Indiana, 2021). This law was found to discriminate against Black voters, who are more likely to

¹Study conducted M.V. Hood III and Charles S. Bullock, III, both professors of political science at the University of Georgia since 1999 and 1968, respectively.

²Study conducted by Abby Budiman, a research analyst at Pew Research Center on race and ethnicity.

³Pew Research Center is a non-partisan research organization.

lack the proper photo ID to vote.⁴ Furthermore, if the law is enforced, a larger percentage of likely Black voters (20%) than White voters (14%) would be unable to vote (Barreto, Nuño, Sanchez). Given that Georgia has a comparable voter ID law in place (Georgia Secretary of State, 2021), these laws are highly likely to have a similar impact. A reduction in polling stations in the Atlanta metro area also increased voting barriers. Georgia voters “had 331 fewer polling places than in November 2012, a 13% reduction,” largely due to local cost saving measures, with Atlanta Metro Black voters facing disproportionately small numbers of polling stations compared to the rest of the state (Fowler, 2020).⁵ The analysis also found that while both White and Black neighborhoods saw an increase in voters per polling station compared to previous decades, Black voters are less likely to vote by mail and have a higher probability of voting in person on the day of the election (Fowler, 2020). Ultimately, both of these measures appear to decrease the political power of Black voters.

A History of Discrimination

Voter suppression against Blacks has a long and turbulent history in the United States, particularly in Southern states such as Georgia. After slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War and Blacks finally received the right to vote in the South as a result of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, they elected congressional representatives across the region (History, Art, & Archives: United States House of Representatives, 2021) before strict voter discrimination laws barred them from voting. For example, Georgia Governor Hoke Smith signed a literacy test requirement for voters in 1907 that did not apply to war veterans and their largely White descendants, ensuring the law specifically disenfranchised Black Georgians (Today in Georgia

⁴The study was conducted by Matt A. Barreto, Stephen A. Nuño, and Gabriel R. Sanchez at the University of Washington Institute for the Study of Inequality and Race.

⁵The data was determined through an analysis by ProPublica, a journalistic nonprofit, and Georgia Public Broadcasting, a radio network with funding from the state of Georgia.

History, 2013). Due in part to these laws, many Blacks fled the South, ensuring that those who remained were a political minority (United States Census Bureau, 2020).⁶ Despite these developments, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 re-enfranchised many Blacks in the South (United States Department of Justice, 2017) and the African American population in Georgia has increased steadily in recent decades (Pew Research 2020). Meanwhile, the amount of voters per polling station has increased as the number of polling stations has decreased (Fowler, 2020). Furthermore, Georgia's 2005 voter ID law was bolstered by the Supreme Court's 2008 *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* ruling that Indiana's voter ID law was constitutional (Gillespie, 2015).⁷ Indiana's law was even stricter than Georgia's, as only United States or Indiana IDs were allowed, indicating that laws such as Georgia's would remain in place (Georgia Secretary of State, State of Indiana, 2021). The Supreme Court in the 2013 case *Shelby County v. Holder* also ensured that the preclearance section of the Voting Rights Act, which forced states with voter suppression histories to receive approval from the Justice Department, was no longer applicable, (Gillespie, 2015) allowing Georgia to cut polling locations without federal approval (Fowler, 2020).

Real World Effects

While it is well supported that voter suppression laws make it more difficult for Black Atlantans to vote, the actual impact on voter turnout is more complex. Black voters have to wait in longer lines due to a smaller number of polling stations (Fowler, 2020), and according to a Bipartisan Policy Center report (BPC), “560,000 eligible voters [in 2016] failed to cast a ballot because of problems related to polling place management, including long lines.” (Weil et al,

⁶Pew Research Center is a non-partisan research organization.

⁷The study referenced was conducted by Andra Juan Gillespie, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Emory University with a Masters in Political Science from Yale.

2019).⁸ Notably, during the 2018 midterm elections, Georgia voters waited longer than voters from any other state (an average of 21.7 minutes compared to the national average of 8.7). According to a Brennan Center for Justice report, White voters waited around 45% less time than Black voters in 2018 (Klain et al, 2020).⁹ However, relative to 2014, voter turnout increased considerably for Black voters, suggesting that voter ID laws have little impact on voter turnout, both nationally and in Georgia (Pew Research, 2019). This is further supported by Gillespie, who concluded that Black voter turnout actually increased after the institution of voter ID laws, though it was not the voter ID laws themselves that increased turnout (Gillespie, 2015). In contrast, Hood and Bullock find that turnout did decrease, but only slightly, and not specifically affecting Black voters, noting that during the 2008 election in Georgia, the turnout only would have increased by 0.4% had the 2005 voter ID law in Georgia not been implemented (Hood & Bullock, 2012). They also found that the law had a largely race neutral effect, with White Georgians slightly more impacted than Blacks (Hood & Bullock, 2012). In Atlanta specifically, Black voters (who overwhelmingly support Democrats), have seen Democratic presidential candidates perform better in every election since 2012, with Republicans losing by 0.23% in 2020, cementing Georgia's status as a swing state. Finally, Democrats won both Senate runoff races by even larger margins than President Joe Biden (Georgia Secretary of State, 2021).

Warnock is also the first Black senator to represent Georgia, a testament to increasing voting power despite the voting restrictions. Ultimately, while voting restrictions placed on Blacks may

⁸The report was authored by Christopher Thomas, who worked for the Michigan Department of State helping to administer elections for 40 years, as well as Matthew Weil who formally served on the Department of the Treasury, Charles Stewart III, a MIT political science professor, and Tim Harper, a senior policy analyst with the BPC.

⁹The report was authored by Hannah Klain, a Judicial Law Clerk at United States Court Of Appeals, Kevin Morris, a former housing researcher and economist with the Federal Reserve, Max Feldman, who graduated from Havard with Bachelor of Arts and NYU with a Juris Doctor Degree from Havard and edited for the *NYU Law Review*, and Rebecca Ayala, who conducts research with the Brennan Center for Justice, a national institute specializing in public policy.

be harmful on an individual basis, Black voters in Atlanta have unprecedented political power, particularly in their ability to swing federal elections.

Conclusion

Voter suppression measures instituted by local and state governments in the Atlanta Metro area have made voting a more challenging process specifically for Black Voters, yet there is insufficient evidence that these measures had any significant impact on large-scale Black political power in the region. In March of 2021, just after Democrats' Senate victories, the Republican controlled state government in Georgia passed SB 202 into law, which halves the amount of time voters can request an absentee ballot pre-election and prohibits election officials from distributing mail-in ballot request forms to voters (Georgia General Assembly, 2021). According to a Reuters analysis, the amount of drop boxes in the inner 4 counties of the Atlanta Metro were cut to only 23, which is likely to impact Black voters who comprise over $\frac{1}{3}$ of the Black voters in the state (Layne, 2021). Ultimately, even if candidates with Black support continue to win by larger margins, the individual rights of citizens to easily and reasonably vote are paramount; as such, it is time for Georgia's state government to consider eliminating voter restrictions given their discriminatory nature.

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