

SHIFTING THE PURPOSE OF ENDING VOTER SUPPRESSION

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After an intense 2020 presidential election cycle, Joe Biden is the 46th president of the United States. Stacey Abrams is a politician who is passionate about being a voting rights activist. During the 2020 election cycle, she was often credited as the person who increased Democratic voters making it possible for Georgia to vote blue in 2020. However, Stacey Abrams' efforts were not completely centered on winning electoral votes, as her get out the vote campaign is centered around combating voter suppression. For Black women to thrive in elections, there needs to be a shift in the election system. Stacey Abrams' get out the vote campaign proves that voter suppression exists and eliminating this will give Black women the opportunity to hold a position in office. This paper explores how the current electoral system is flawed for Black women and other marginalized groups, eradicating voter suppression will increase the representation of Black women, and voter suppression is a product of white supremacy.

The election system is flawed due to prioritizing votes of some rather than all. Stacey Abrams' 2018 governor's race only served to prove that elections have historically been controlled by those in power. Georgia's gubernatorial race in 2018 perpetuated voter suppression, racial bias, and sexism. Stacey Abrams was running against Georgia's Secretary of state Brian Kemp, an adamant conservative. After months of grassroots movements, getting out the vote campaigns, and encouraging citizens to vote, she lost the race. Stacey Abrams' non-concession speech states, "We all understand challenges and complications; however, this year, more than two hundred years into Georgia's democratic experiment, the state failed its voters." In her speech, Stacey Abrams explains that many citizens of Georgia wanted to practice their right to vote but there were a multitude of barriers prohibiting them in doing so. Abrams was not able to successfully gain these positions of power because of these walls. Later in her speech, Abrams claims, "Georgia citizens tried to exercise their Constitutional rights and were still denied the ability to elect their leaders. Under the watch of the now former Secretary of State, democracy failed Georgians of every political party, every race, every region. Again." Abrams is decentralizing the arguments from associating voter suppression to political parties and centering it back to having the ability to pick your leaders and not have those barriers that prohibit it in the first place.

The election system is meant to allow people to vote for the candidate that fits their interest without having to jump through hoops. The flawed electoral system prohibits Black women from having the ability to run for positions of power, while, simultaneously, Black women are also fighting other forms of oppression when running for office. Stacey Abrams' non-concession speech also states,

"Which is why on Election Night, I declared that our fight to count every vote is not about me. It is about us." Even though not everyone who was affected by voter suppression was someone who supported Abrams, the effort was done to ensure this election system was effective. Abrams also stated, "It's about the democracy we share and our responsibility to preserve our way of life. Our democracy—because voting is a right and not a privilege." In a society that has racial hierarchies, privileges exist when being born white or in closer proximity to white. Race is a social construction that dictates who can hold power. If voting was more equitable then Black women would have the same opportunities as their white counterparts to run for these positions.

Eliminating voter suppression will create a pathway for Women of Color to not only vote but hold positions in office. The tactics of voter suppression affect marginalized communities by having strict voting regulations, voter ID law, and lack of access to voting centers. Voting has not been exclusively for everyone, as those in power have always dictated who has the ability to vote. Since most of the people who are affected by voter suppression are marginalized people, it is, in turn, harder for politicians who come from marginalized groups to get votes from their community. In the paper "Media Framing Of Black Women's Campaigns of the US House of Representatives" by Orlanda Ward, it states, "Black women are framed as having advantages due to their race and gender, but at the same time failing to win over White voters, despite evidence to the contrary" (Ward, 2016). In a racialized society it can be very difficult to reach the interest of others who do not share your same experience. The full enfranchisement of Black Voters would mean that Black candidates would have similar support as White candidates.

Black women are also subjected to many harmful stereotypes. In the podcast *The United States of Anxiety* episode "What Does the Right Woman Sound Like?" the host invited Rena Cook who is a specialist in teaching women on how to use their voice. She states, "Of course the double standard still handicaps outspoken women but here is the bottom line, we can't control that" (Wright 2018). There may not be the full abolishment of sexism under white supremacy but fully enfranchised Black voters would help women of color take these positions.

Stacey Abrams' strategy of combating voter suppression is a shift that could be adopted to other races' empowerment, especially for women of color. King describes the strategy of "expanding their coalition to include disengaged voters of color, as opposed to continuing the focus on persuading undecided, moderate, often white voters"

(King, 2020). The power of voters of color has impacted democracy before; another time where voters of color came in huge numbers was in 2008. In 2008, voters of color aided greatly in electing president Barack Obama to office. Through the power of white supremacy, new voter restrictions were put into place: “The substantial and accelerating population growth among minority populations shows that the 2008 display of minority voting strength is not a passing phenomenon” (Haygood, 2012). For a system of white supremacy, having marginalized communities succeed in elections is a threat. The disenfranchisement of BIPOC people was done purposely to keep control of the power.

Abrams and her team’s approach to include those disengaged voters of color is a shift that needs to occur overall to ensure that people can practice their right to vote. Abrams has been working for this movement for a long time, even after her close loss in 2018, her efforts did not change. Georgia turning blue in the 2020 election was not necessarily a win only for the Democrats but a win for Black women who have been unfairly treated by this election system. It has revived the idea that people can elect the leaders that will serve them. Abrams told POLITICO shortly before Election Day, “Only the message is not trying to persuade them to share Democratic values. Your message is to persuade them that voting can actually yield change” (King, 2020). This strategy has brought back the idea that voting can make an impact with the potential to encourage Black women to pursue these positions because they have the support of their community. Removing barriers to voting will allow for more representation of Black women in office that will transcend into different policy changes. It is true that descriptive representation matters.

In the video “Stop Killing Us: Black Transgender Women’s Lived experiences,” Bela stated, “You can’t have a cis women advocating for a trans women because that woman don’t know our needs, you can’t have a caucasian male advocating for us because he don’t know our needs, you need a trans women of color” (Complex News, 2020). Although this advocates for Trans Rights, it is important to listen to the message. People within communities know their issues the best, and electing officials fairly will allow for this change to take place. In Lecture 1 of week 11 it is mentioned how political representation holds power in the form of “who has political voice through elected representatives” or “who benefits from political representation.” If political representation is so impactful it is obvious why white men benefit from electing their leaders. White rich men are aware of the needs of other white rich men. Removing barriers to vote can eventually lead to a cycle where more Black women will go into office for the needs of the black community especially Black women. “In a role model capacity, the elected representatives of a group may likewise influence public perceptions of the group, and public, and legislator preferences concerning policies related to the group” (Haid-

er-Markel, 2010). Therefore, ending voter suppression will increase the turnout of voters of color, allowing voters of color to choose people who represent them and therefore allow for policies to change.

There are those who question methods to combat voter suppression, like increasing voters of color, are upholding the values of white supremacy. The 2008 presidential election mobilized voters of color to cast their votes and have that platform to participate in democracy. However, after the election, those against it worked to create barriers: “The states that have passed these restrictions are, in many cases, the very same states that experienced high rates of minority population growth and political participation over the last decade” (Haygood, 2012). We have seen an increase of people voicing that voting should be easier. In states like Colorado there is a mail-in ballot strategy that has increased voter turnout on all sides. There are many strategies that can combat voter suppression, but instead certain states have continued to set these barriers. Racism is the main driver in white supremacy policies pursued by state legislators who are aware that they are capable of these strategies. They will continue to ignore the strategy to uphold power over others.

Stacey Abrams is one of many Black female leaders who have come up with strategies to combat white supremacy. It is only hopeful for the future of democracy that these grassroots movements continue. The adoption of Abrams’ strategy should not be the only mission, it should encourage others to see the needs of their community. In the 2020 election we saw other states also have amazing turnout because people are invested in democracy. Stacey Abrams is a Black woman who has continued to fight voter suppression, so there can be more equitable elections for other Black women. Black women will thrive in political office if the shift continues to occur within communities. Mobilization does not stop with the currently elected president, it is only the continuation of the greater fight against white supremacy.

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