

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
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A CONVERSATION WITH STACEY ABRAMS:
RACE AND POLITICAL POWER IN THE UNITED STATES

Washington, D.C.
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Opening Remarks:

TED GAYER
Executive Vice President
The Brookings Institution

Moderator:

JELANI COBB
Ira A. Lipman Professor of Journalism, Columbia University
Staff Writer, The New Yorker

Featured Speaker:

STACEY ABRAMS
Founder, Fair Fight Georgia
Former Minority Leader, Georgia House of Representatives
Former Democratic Gubernatorial Nominee, Georgia

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. GAYER: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Black History Month celebration at Brookings. And this is a packed house, I love it. It's so packed, in fact, I think we have people in our spillover space, so greetings to people in the spillover space, as well. They don't get enough love usually around here.

I'm going to assert, humbly, that you're not all here for the introductory speaker, and that's totally okay. But that makes me motivated to try and keep the introduction short.

For those of you who don't know, my name's Ted Gayer. I am the executive vice president here at Brookings. And as I said, this morning we're here for the marquee event and Brookings celebration of Black History Month.

Before we begin, I'm looking through the crowd, I wanted to give a special welcome. We have a number of artists in the crowd from the Richard Wright Public Charter School of Journalism and Media Arts. They created the videos that you saw earlier. If you came a little earlier, there were videos on the screen. And if you haven't yet, if you go straight down the hall after this event, we have a fantastic cafeteria and in that cafeteria we're featuring some of their art. So I would like them, if they would, to stand up.

(Applause)

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you again. Thank you for sharing your art with us. It's terrific.

I also want to thank the people here at Brookings who made this event possible, including representatives from our Inclusion and Diversity Committee and our Raised Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative. Brookings works best when we work as a team, and so thanks to all of our team members who put this event together today.

Our special guest today is Stacey Abrams. (Applause) That's even before I went through the bio here. (Laughter) And the bio is impressive: an author, an entrepreneur, a nonprofit CEO, a political leader. In 2018, after serving 11 years in the

Georgia House of Representatives, seven as minority leader, Abrams became the Democratic nominee for governor of Georgia. She was the first black woman to become the gubernatorial nominee for a major party in the United States. (Applause)

Over the course of her career she has founded multiple organizations devoted to voting rights, training, and hiring young people of color, and tackling social issues at both the state and national levels. She is a lifetime member of the Council of Foreign Relations, the 2012 recipient of the John F. Kennedy New Frontier Award, and a current member of the board of directors for the Center for American Progress.

And if that was not enough, she's also written eight romantic suspense novels. (Laughter) I'm feeling quite humble up here. And in March 2019 -- you're a month late [*sic*], we could be featuring you right outside -- in March 2019, she'll be releasing her new book, "Lead From the Outside: How to Build Your Future and Make Real Change." So we're delighted you're here today. Thank you very much. (Applause)

I'm also honored to welcome Jelani Cobb, our moderator for today's discussion. (Applause) Yeah, there you go. He is the Ira A. Lipman professor of journalism at the Columbia School of Journalism and is a contributor to The New Yorker magazine where he writes about race, politics, history, and culture. He was actually telling us a little bit about the courses he teaches before we came in here, and people in the green room were ready to sign up and audit the class.

His articles and essays have also appeared in other publications, including The Washington Post, The New Republic, and Essence. He is the author of the book "The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress."

So two very impressive bios and I would just ask that you all join me in welcoming Stacey Abrams and Jelani Cobb to the stage. Thank you again. (Applause)

MR. COBB: Hey.

MS. ABRAMS: Hello.

MR. COBB: How you doing?

MS. ABRAMS: I'm well. How are you?

MR. COBB: Cool.

MS. ABRAMS: We're going to pretend there's not anybody else in the room?

MR. COBB: Yeah, that's it. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: Okay.

MR. COBB: How are you all?

GROUP: Great. Excellent.

MR. COBB: Good, good. So I'm very happy to be able to be here today. I'm particularly happy to be able to talk to somebody who I've known and admired for a long time; had the privilege of being one of her constituents at one point in the time that I was living in Atlanta; and, you know, inarguably one of the most important voices in American politics right now. So, thank you. So, welcome.

MS. ABRAMS: Thank you for having me.

MR. COBB: And so I guess we can just jump into it. I was going to say I'm really particularly excited to be here, especially when I realized that you were announcing your campaign for President. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: My HOA is looking for a leader, yes. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Yeah. (Laughter) Okay, maybe I got bad intel on that then.

But we have more than enough to talk about. And I guess we'll start with the kind of overarching question, which is about, you know, the thing that ties together the midterms, ties together 2016, will likely be a prominent theme in 2020, and that is the fight around voter suppression. And can you just talk for a minute about the architecture of voter suppression and how it functions and what we can -- well, I'll say what we can do about it? But how exactly do the mechanics of this work?

MS. ABRAMS: Sure. So first I want to say thank you so much for taking the time. And I want to say thank you to Dr. Gayer and to Brookings for having me.

My belief in the responsibility to fight voter suppression started when I was growing up. My parents were both civil rights activists as teenagers in Mississippi. My dad was arrested signing people up to vote when he was 16. And my mom used to take us with her when she would pick us up from school on Election Day, she would take us with her to vote. There are six of us, so we looked like make way for ducklings, spilling out. (Laughter) But we were raised to understand that voting is directly tied to the services and policies that you want to see.

Voter suppression acts as a means of denying those policies reality and it is baked into the DNA of America. It has been perfected in recent years, in the last two decades, in a way that lets us forget that it's real because it has so many pieces, and that's the architecture.

Voter suppression isn't simply saying you can't vote. Voter suppression is both a physical activity, but it's also a psychic effect. Telling people their votes won't count, telling people that the system is rigged has the act of actually stopping people from trying to use it. And then just to make sure it works, there is the actual apparatus. And I think about it in three ways.

There is the registration access, making it difficult to get on the rolls. You cannot vote in the United States unless you are signed up to do so. It's like having a driver's license. And so what we have found is that depending on the state you're in, there have been impediments put in place to registration.

If you're in Texas, they tell third-party organizations it's difficult to register you. That matters because the hardest to register communities are communities of color, newly registered citizens, and low-income communities. They require third parties to come to them because they often don't know how to do it on their own.

In Georgia, we had sort of the trifecta of it was hard to get on the rolls because the secretary of state kept raiding the offices or attacking those who were doing third-party registrations. He then used what's called "exact match," which said that if your

name has any error when someone is typing it into the system, that would be a predicate for denying you the right to vote. And in Georgia, in 2018, 53,000 people were caught up in this bureaucratic nightmare.

So let's say your last name is Del Rios and you spell it D-E-L-space-R-I-O-S because that's your last name. Under Georgia law -- or not Georgia law, but Georgia's practice on your driver's license, they take out the space. So that becomes the database that is used, but your parents named you Del Rios with a space. So you put in your name the way it is on your birth certificate and on your Social Security card, but in Georgia, because the driver's license administration does not recognize the space, you are denied the right to vote because it does not exactly match the database. Fifty-three thousand people were denied, 90 percent of whom were people of color.

The third part is that if you are a naturalized citizen there were some parts of the secretary of state's office that were demanding that you use your alien registration number as part of your application. It's against the federal law to use your alien registration because you're no longer an alien. You are now a citizen. And so in order to achieve the right to vote, you were being denied access. So registration's the first.

And then there's the use it or lose it laws. That's the Ohio case that was just settled by the Supreme Court. In the United States, we do not have mandatory voting. Use it or lose it laws were originally designed to say that if you're dead or you've moved, you probably shouldn't vote where you used to live. That makes sense. But it's now been used to say if you don't vote in a certain number of successive elections, that can be used as a reason to take you off the rolls.

But the problem is it's not precise and so you have hundreds of thousands of people who were removed from the rolls who voted, and they don't find out they've been removed until they go to vote. But because most of these states don't do same-day registration, you're just denied the right to vote. So that's the first piece, registration.

Second is ballot access. Ballot access is in states that have absentee

balloting, you apply for an absentee ballot, it may or may not arrive. Jermaine Dupri, who -- So So Def -- he had to fly his daughter from Miami because her absentee ballot, which she applied for, never showed up. Jermaine ain't my daddy, so if you do not have someone who is wealthy enough to actually fly you home to vote, you've been suppressed because your right to vote has been denied because you didn't get your absentee ballot.

If you live in Mississippi or Alabama, you may have to pay a notary public to verify that you have submitted your ballot properly, which means you have to pay someone for the right to vote. So ballot access becomes an issue. It also is an issue with early voting.

Moving polling places. Georgia has about 3,000 polling places, precincts. They shut down 214 of them. If you live in a county where there are only two and now there's one and you don't have a car, and the one that you used to go to was down the street and the one you have to go to now is 5 to 10 miles away, you're not going to be able to vote because you don't have a car. And so ballot access becomes an issue.

And then the third is counting the ballots. And I just refer to that as "the Florida problem." (Laughter)

MR. COBB: I'm sure the people in Florida are very happy to hear that.
(Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: I mean, they've been the most constant example of this. But that is once you've submitted your ballot, did it actually count? Did they count your -- did they actually process it?

In Georgia, we had to go to court four times in the 10-day period between Election Day and the day of my non-concession speech, and we got 3-1/2 verdicts in our favor. And part of that was that certain counties were throwing out absentee ballots because the signature didn't match. My signature doesn't match from Kroger to Wells Fargo.
(Laughter) And they were matching it against your driver's license that you signed 10 years ago before you actually figured out how to do the curly S that you liked. So that was being

used to deny people the right to vote.

They were throwing out absentee ballots because people put the date in the wrong place because there were two lines that said "Date." One was birth date and the other was the date that you were submitting it, but it didn't say "Birth Date" and "Date of Submission," it just said "Date." And certain counties were denying the right to vote.

And so across the country that ballot counting becomes the issue. So registration, ballot access, and ballot counting, that's how suppression works.

MR. COBB: So I guess the thing that's interesting is that there's a narrative that we have about voting rights. And anybody who's seen *Eyes on the Prize*, anybody who's taken an African American history class, we know that narrative. You know, it's Thurgood Marshall fighting against the white primary in Texas. It is the 1965 Selma march. It's kind of all the pinnacle points in access to the ballot.

How has this been able to persist 50+ years after the Voting Rights Act? How is this able to be the case? I mean, the Voting Rights Act, the last time it was reauthorized was 98-0 in Senate. And yet, these deeply anti-democratic, racist practices are able to persist to the current day. How did we get into this situation?

MS. ABRAMS: We've never not been in this situation. What has happened is they've perfected the insidious approach to it. It used to be very plain: you just denied them the right to vote. You denied African Americans the right to vote. You denied women the right to vote. It wasn't until the 20th century that Native Americans were allowed to vote. And so for most of American history the denial was de jure. It was in the law that you couldn't vote.

The Voting Rights Act forced it into de facto denial and that was putting in place these obstacles and these barriers that on their face may seem fairly low bars to jump over, but when they're yoked together into a system, they make it difficult to vote. And the challenge that happened for us is the *Shelby* decision in 2013. Because, yes, people of good conscience voted for the Voting Rights Act, but so did people who just wanted to get

reelected and didn't want to be called racist. And what happened in 2013 was that the guardrails that created -- that kept de facto voter suppression in check, those guardrails were removed. Georgia, again, is one of the states that post *Shelby* has implemented most of the rules that are considered to be the most insidious when it comes to voter suppression.

And I think the inflection point has been the demographic change in America. It's fine for everyone to vote as long as they vote the way you want them to. What has happened is that you have a new American majority that is largely comprised of people of color, millennials and Gen Z, unmarried white women, and progressives across the country of good conscience regardless of race who have all aligned themselves on the side of certain issues. And the only way to stop those issues from gaining primacy and gaining voice is voter suppression.

And that inflection point has accelerated the urgency on the other side because you can only control public policy in a democracy by controlling who sets the policy. And voter suppression is the most effective way to block that policy because if you can never elect leaders who reflect your values, those values never gain traction in the public domain.

MR. COBB: I mean, it's interesting talking about *Shelby*. I was in North Carolina and I was following Reverend William Barber around, another person who's done a lot of work on this. And I get to this place and people are talking about voter suppression issues in the state, and he's recalling a conversation he's had with a local elected official. And one of the truisms of American politics is the lower you go on the hierarchy, the less elegant the lies are. (Laughter)

And so, you know, this person said, being confronted about voter suppression and was told that it was racist, and he said we don't suppress your votes because you're black. We suppress your votes because you vote for Democrats.

MS. ABRAMS: Yes.

MR. COBB: And so he had no idea that it was wrong, what was wrong with

that statement. (Laughter) I was kind of like all right then. I mean, now we've cleared that up. I guess we can just go on about our business.

But there was also another kind of aspect of this which was striking. It almost seems like someplace that you -- something that you'd hear about in a country that does not have a very long history of democratic elections, and that is that one of the candidates in the election was, in fact, charged with overseeing the election in which he was running.

MS. ABRAMS: I have no experience with that. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: I mean, this is a personal question. As you're going into this, what is your thinking about -- it's almost saying like -- the analogy people gave was like it's being in a boxing match where you're fighting somebody who's your opponent and the referee.

MS. ABRAMS: Yes. And, well, I would add one more. And he was also the scorekeeper. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: And the scorekeeper, right.

MS. ABRAMS: And that's the challenge. And that, again, goes to the insidiousness of voter suppression. It was entirely legal. In fact, it's constitutional that he got to do that. The laws allow certain things, and that's one of the lessons from *Brown v. Board of Education*.

When it comes to voter suppression, it is not simply an act of something being illegal. It is something being unethical and immoral, and we had a layer of incompetence that, you know, further stirred the pot. But the reality was what he did was entirely legal and wholly wrong. But because the law permits it, the remedies are limited unless you have people who are in power who say that this law should be changed. But you can't get the people into power because the laws say that they can use that power to stop you from voting.

And it's that vicious cycle that is so concerning to me and it's why voter

suppression, in my mind, has to be considered the crisis of our day. Because the erosion of our democracy is not simply an authoritarian regime. It is actually using the laws as they exist to undermine the very lawmaking that we desire and that we deserve.

MR. COBB: I mean, it also seems to me like, and I want to talk about Fair Fight and what you're doing in response to this, it also seems to me that being somebody that looks at these questions from the historical point of view that it was these very tactics that led to the grass-roots groundswell of activity in the first place. And so it seemed almost like if you place a pot on the stove and the pot begins to boil, and then you turn down the burner and it stops boiling, that you could walk away and come back and go I wonder what will happen if I turn this back up, and not realize that it's going to have a similar effect.

And so in that regard, that's what I thought of when I saw the news about you being involved in organizing Fair Fight. And so could you talk a little bit about what you're doing, what Fair Fight is doing, and what the strategy is in response to what's happening in Georgia?

MS. ABRAMS: Sure. So November 6th, a day that will live -- no, sorry.
(Laughter) Anyway --

MR. COBB: It will just live, right.

MS. ABRAMS: That evening I had a decision to make, like so many other candidates. Our race was too close to call, but there were cries for me to concede or to say -- just to, you know, to call it. And I wouldn't, in part because we were getting phone calls and emails from across the state of Georgia about challenges people were facing.

So in the litany, I was cutting myself short, but in the litany of counting ballots and ballot access, Georgia had, according to a poll done or a survey done by BlackPAC, had 40 percent longer lines for African Americans than any state in the country. Black people were standing in line for up to four hours, and that's assuming they got to vote. If you're a shift worker and every hour you stand in line is an hour of work for pay you're losing, you are not often able to miss an entire day's pay to cast a vote. And so a lot of

people just abandoned the opportunity and went home or went back to work.

And that's not counting the students at the Atlanta University Center who were given provisional ballots because they ran out of paper -- or were not given provisional ballots because they ran out of paper. We had poll workers who were cherry-picking who would get a ballot based on whether they thought they looked like someone who should be able to vote.

This was happening in the cradle of the civil rights movement November 6, 2018. And so that evening my decision to demand that every vote be counted was driven less by a belief that I would be able to overcome the perfidy and bad actions of the secretary of state and more because I understood in that moment my campaign was premised on being a voice for people who had not been seen and heard in the body politic. And my responsibility was to continue to be that voice regardless of what it meant for my potential outcome.

And over the next 10 days, we were able to file lawsuits and we were able to make incremental progress. But at the same time, the other side was destroying ballots and not following the law. And by the time we got to November 16th, the end of the 10-day period, what happened was that we had been able to demonstrate that voter suppression was real.

We received more than 50,000 phone calls. And we all know that if 50,000 people called, imagine who didn't call, who didn't know they should call or could call. And in that moment the responsibility I had was to decide whether I was going to launch a legal battle for myself, which would allow me to contest the election and possibly see if I could become governor anyway or if I could call an end to that contest, but instead start what I believe to be the larger, more important battle, which is to fight for a fair election in Georgia.

And I was not alone. My campaign was not the only campaign that faced this challenge. I was just the most public one. And, you know, as a writer, as a fiction writer, it was the perfect archetype. You know, the villain was clear. I mean, you just need a twirly

moustache and a railroad track. (Laughter) I mean, you're the secretary of state declaring yourself the victor of an election you oversaw and you surprisingly won. Okay.

And I was the first African-American woman to ever have the opportunity and I came this close. I mean, it's a great narrative if you like tragedies. (Laughter) And for me the response to sorrow, the response to anger is action. (Applause) I was raised to believe that you don't simply identify problems. You have to figure out how you intend to solve them and that sometimes solving the problem doesn't mean you actually win.

So the solution to this challenge does not mean I get to be governor. If we fixed all of the election laws in Georgia, nothing will undo the decision made on November 6, 2018. But Fair Fight Action is my responsibility because it says that this should not happen to anyone else; that the election that's happening -- there's going to be an election in March in Gwinnett County, which is the most diverse county in Georgia, to determine whether they get access to public transit. I mean, it's 2019 and we're having a fight over whether people should be able to get public transit.

My responsibility through Fair Fight is to lift up that responsibility and to talk about why that vote matters and to make sure it's a fair fight. And so what we're doing is three things.

One is that we filed a mammoth lawsuit, 64-page complaint, that, as I said, yokes together all of those pieces of voter suppression and says that as a system, in the state of Georgia the right to vote has been substantially harmed and that disenfranchisement is occurring at a level that violates the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Voting Rights Act, HAVA, and the Georgia Constitution. And it's just wrong.

The second is that we are pushing for better legislation. Because we know that litigation may not turn out the way we want it to, we're also pushing for better legislation. Luckily, there is an organization that's been created actually by members of the House of Representatives and the Senate in Georgia called the Voting Rights Caucus, and they're going to be pushing for better laws around absentee ballots, but also to stop us from having

hackable machines because that was also an issue with the secretary of state. He oversaw some of the oldest and most incompetent machines in the country and refused Homeland Security support to ensure that the right to vote wasn't compromised.

And then the third is advocacy. We have to continue to tie the vote to the issues because voting by itself is, yeah, okay, final vote. But when people understand that if you want access to healthcare, you have to vote. If you believe criminal justice reform is real and true, you have to vote. If you want people to pick up your trash every week and not every two weeks, you have to vote. And so part of Fair Fight's responsibility is to connect the dots between the public policy outcomes that are either impugned by or made real by voting.

MR. COBB: So then I want to go back to a conversation we had I think it was actually before you announced your candidacy. And so we talked about your strategy of bringing in more people, expanding the electorate. And the last election, 2014, Nathan Deal and Jason Carter, I think it was 2.4-, 2.5 million people voted in that election. And in this election 3.9 million people voted. And so you got -- he got about 1.1 million voters and you got about 1.9?

MS. ABRAMS: 1,923,000.

MR. COBB: Okay, right. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: Not that I was counting. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Not that you were counting. It was an 800,000 voter expansion. And so when we had this conversation, though, and you were talking about, and so if you lived in Georgia for any point in time, within 6 months you will hear about the 500,000 unregistered black voters. I lived in Atlanta for 11 years and I kept hearing about the 500,000 unregistered black voters.

And so we were talking and you said that this was -- you know, you were going to expand the electorate and bring people out. And I was like, Stacey, do those people even exist? Are we sure that those people are there? And you were like these

people are there. They are a viable electorate.

And I was like but they didn't come out for Obama. And you were like we're going to do things that actually go further than what the Obama campaign did in Georgia to make a difference here.

And so, one, I want to concede being wrong in my skepticism because you could hear my eyebrow raise over the phone.

MS. ABRAMS: I heard your eyes roll. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: You heard my eyes roll. But the other part of it is, more significantly, what goes into mobilizing these electorates not just in Georgia, but specifically your experience in Georgia? And is that applicable to progressives and people of color running in the South and elsewhere in the coming elections?

MS. ABRAMS: Yeah, Brookings is nonpartisan. I don't have that problem, so I am partisan. And I will say this advice is not for anyone who's not a Democrat. (Laughter)

Number one, you have to start early. And when you and I had the conversation it was after I'd been in the leadership position in the House for seven years. And over that seven-year period, I had been laying the groundwork for this transformation in our electorate. Number one, you have to hire people who can go into these communities, who understand these communities. And it is true that anyone can ask, but people tend to listen to those who remind them of themselves.

And cultural competence matters. It is a real thing. And so what we have been doing since I became leader, I've been building a team of young people by and large, because I couldn't pay them much, they were young, training them to do this work. And also training them to be hired by campaigns because often campaigns tend to relegate communities of color in particular to certain jobs and that's it. And so we have been working for seven years to build a cohort that was multiracial, multiethnic, reflected religious differences, sexual orientation differences.

We had a truly representative sample of Georgia embedded in our campaign and that is critical. Because when we launched in May of 2017, a year before the election, we were the only campaign going into communities. We had the first Latino media roundtable, the first Asian-Pacific Islander roundtable, the first LGBTQ roundtable. We met with black papers, but we also talked about how do we invest in each of your mediums? How do we make sure that while everyone's thinking about how do I get on ABC, I'm making sure that I'm in the Patch (inaudible) posts. You know, we are pushing things into communities at a local level. So that was number two.

Number three was that we actually began conversations and community. We didn't create artificial groups. We asked people who said they were interested what do you want to do, and then we funded them, we resourced that. There were a lot of pundits who decried our campaign for being profligate with our spending because we were spending up to 80 percent of our money every month reaching out to voters, which they thought was insane. They're like she's talking to voters. She should be saving that money for media. I'm like I want them to vote, so I'm going to ask them to vote.

But that investment was different and these are communities that had never seen it. By the time we got to the general, we were the first campaign in Georgia history to run Spanish-language television ads.

MR. COBB: Seriously?

MS. ABRAMS: Yes.

MR. COBB: Wow. (Applause)

MS. ABRAMS: We spent money on -- oh, thank you. We ran the first --

MR. COBB: That's astonishing.

MS. ABRAMS: Yes, but real. We ran the first bilingual canvass. We had our walk cards in Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese. We made sure that every community regardless of their size was hearing from us because we don't believe in turnout models, meaning that you just go to the people who are going to vote for you and you talk to

them at the end. Everyone was a persuasion target. I had to convince everyone they like me. I didn't take anyone for granted. And that's why we were also the only campaign I believe that was on both country music radio and urban radio at the exact same time.

(Laughter)

But what we did differently was that we spent a commensurate amount based on the size of the population. And when it happened in previous elections there was an oversampled spending on communities that were very narrowly likely to vote and there was a deep underspend in communities that shared your values, but were taken for granted. I took nothing for granted.

And in the end we ran a campaign that was the most -- we raised more money than any campaign in Georgia history. I received more votes than any Democrat in Georgia history, including President Obama and Secretary Clinton. We tripled Latino turnout, tripled Asian-Pacific Islander turnout, increased youth turnout by 139 percent. And in 2014 -- hold one, one more number. (Laughter) In 2014, 1.1 million Democrats voted. In 2018, 1.2 million African Americans voted for me. (Applause)

And all of that, centering the communities of color, having conversations about the LGBTQ community as an ally, doing all of that work was supposed to distance me from the white vote. I received a higher percentage of the white vote than any candidate on the Democratic side of the aisle in more than 20 years. (Applause)

MR. COBB: I mean, that's fascinating because people usually decry that very kind of outreach, which is basically democracy, as identity politics, right. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: Yes.

MR. COBB: But people disparage it as identity politics. And Alicia Garza, who's one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, had a really great line about that. She said, yeah, we're organizing people who identify as being left out.

MS. ABRAMS: Yes.

MR. COBB: And so it's amazing that you could pull that off.

And so I want to make sure we have time to have some questions from the audience. And we'll have like a little bit of -- no, wait. I'm going to ask like one or two more questions and then I'm just telling you all to formulate your questions. Right? So when we go to you you'll have your questions in hand.

So if you're saying for Georgia three or four bullet point things that you do right off the bat to make this a more democratic state, what do you change?

MS. ABRAMS: Absentee ballot rules need to be uniform. There should be different democracy based on your counting.

Number two, registration rules need to be uniform and they should not disadvantage communities that are trying to register.

And three, we need new machines and they need to be hand-marked paper ballots that are verifiable, auditable, and accessible. We had too many counties and too many precincts where you had 3- or 4,000 people showing up and they had two machines, one that was missing a power cord.

So it's making sure everyone gets registered, making sure that folks have actual access to the ballot, and making sure every vote gets counted.

MR. COBB: And so that's a very Georgia-specific question and I want to ask you a kind of bigger national -- well, I think I can fit in two quick questions, a bigger national question, which is that you commented on this recently and the kind of looming possibility that the President will declare a state of emergency as a means of, you know, getting funds to build his border wall. And you had a very succinct explanation for how people should respond to that.

MS. ABRAMS: Don't. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Yeah.

MS. ABRAMS: Here's the reality. He is either going to do it or he is not. The rationale for doing so is that he is trying to gain political clout, having failed miserably in the actual political process. And that political clout is only gained by us giving him airtime

and space and for there to be American histrionics over once again his flouting of our basic norms.

We have a system that will deal with that, the judicial system. There will be lawsuits filed and it is absolutely a true thing that Nancy Pelosi and others should decry the lawlessness of his behavior. But what we cannot do is turn it into a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week circus where we gnash our teeth and beat our breast that he is once again proving that he does not understand how America works. And so I think we have to deny him the audience. (Applause)

MR. COBB: Okay, last question. Are you going to run for Senate?

MS. ABRAMS: I do not know. You want more? (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Well, in interviewing, one of the things that we were taught was don't say anything. Ask a question and then just be quiet.

MS. ABRAMS: In law we were taught just say what you need to and stop talking. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: So I think this is what is called a stalemate.

MS. ABRAMS: There you go. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Okay, so questions. Let me give my little kind of preface.

A question is a request for information. (Laughter) It is typically identified by the inflection at the end of the sentence. In written form this is represented by a question mark. So please phrase your question in the form of a question. (Laughter)

And also, if we can kind of do -- in order to ensure that as many people as possible get to ask a question, can we be as succinct as you can be in your phrasing? And I'll take three questions at a time and then we will kind of deal with those, and then we'll go for another round if we can kind of do speed rounds.

So let's start with --

MS. ABRAMS: The young man in gray.

MR. COBB: Yeah.

MS. ABRAMS: You have to put your hand back up so they'll see you.

SPEAKER: Hello, hello. Do you think the voter age should be changed to 16? Because we have a voice, also. I mean, I'm 18 now, but still.

MR. COBB: Okay, but hold on.

SPEAKER: Kids have a voice, also. We are smart, also.

MR. COBB: Okay, great. So we're going to get two more questions.

SPEAKER: Hi. Would you consider running the National Democratic Committee?

SPEAKER: Is that mic on?

MS. ABRAMS: I'll repeat the questions, guys.

SPEAKER: Hi. Would you consider running the Democratic National Committee with the ideas that you have for getting everybody to vote?

MS. ABRAMS: One more question.

SPEAKER: Hi, Leader Abrams. I actually go to Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville and helped campaign for you, so it's great to be here.

MS. ABRAMS: Thanks so much.

SPEAKER: My question is H.R. 1, it's a bill in the House right now. It's the For the People Act on campaign and like voter laws and everything with that. What are your thoughts on H.R. 1?

MS. ABRAMS: Sure. Okay.

MR. COBB: So the three questions we have are, should the voting age be lowered to 16? Do you have any interest in running the DNC? And what are your thoughts on H.R. 1?

MS. ABRAMS: So on the age of 16, I think that that is a worthy question. I would start with local elections, namely the School Board because I think that's the most direct connection between young people and the necessity of hearing their voices. I believe that municipal elections, because of the granularity of what they do, if we are going to

experiment with age and access, I think starting with municipal elections makes the most sense because it's closest to the people and it's a contained universe.

But I am not opposed to the conversation, but I do think we need to understand a bit better. And because we've kept you out of the conversation so long, I do think starting with municipal elections and School Board elections is the right place to start.

No, I do not want to run the DNC. (Laughter) I worked very closely with Chairman Perez and with his team. I think what they are doing is important. And what I'm pleased about is that the conversation of voter suppression is happening across the country at every level of government. Marcia Fudge is going to be in Georgia next week doing hearings. She was in Brownsville, Texas, last week.

We are doing the work, but we need the conversation to continue because the myth of voter fraud has taken on the air of truth. We have to make certain that the truth of voter suppression takes on the air of urgency.

H.R. 1 is a great -- I think it's a really smart approach. The challenge with H.R. 1 is it conflates so many ideas into one bill. But as an opening salvo, I think it was the necessary one. What my hope is going to be is that we see substantial change in the composition of the Senate. I'm not saying anything about my role in that other than I'm going to make sure Georgia elects a senator that reflects our values. But the goal for me is to make certain that the conversation starts and I think H.R. 1 was an excellent conversation starter and that the pieces that embedded therein are important parts of our national narrative.

MR. COBB: So we'll go for the next round of three questions. The young lady in the red in the back, then the young lady in the black next to her, and on this side the lady with the glasses on her nose.

SPEAKER: So I know we were speculating, but he did just declare a national emergency to build the wall. So what are your thoughts?

MS. MOORE: Hello, my name's Amani Moore. I actually went to school at

Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia. And I wanted to ask like, for lack of a better word, did losing the election discourage you in any way? And if so, how?

MS. FOOSE: Renee Foose, I write for the AFRO. And our community wants to know what is it going to take to elect a Democrat in 2020?

MS. ABRAMS: Okay.

MR. COBB: So for everyone our questions are that apparently a state of emergency has just been declared. I'm sorry, that question blotted out your question. Can you say your question once more?

MS. MOORE: Oh, mine?

MR. COBB: Yeah.

MS. ABRAMS: Was I discouraged?

MR. COBB: Oh, were you discouraged, was Stacey discouraged?

MS. ABRAMS: And how do we win in 2020?

MR. COBB: And how do we win in 2020?

MS. ABRAMS: So, yes, there has been a national emergency declared and I do believe that immediately -- the moment he determines how he intends to fund his emergency, it's the prerogative of the President to declare an emergency and I don't think we need to abrogate that. It's a question of whether he can unilaterally move funds in order to finance his declaration. That is the issue and that is where I believe we need immediate judicial intervention. And I believe that Speaker Pelosi and Leader Schumer need to take actions within Congress to dispute it through the resolution power that they have.

There is no emergency. It is a falsehood and it is entirely a political stunt. And hopefully, he will find that this stunt has the same effect that his last one did, which is to illuminate the lack of empathy he has for Americans and the lack of understanding and respect he has for our body politic. (Applause)

But nobody needs to write about this that much. Just acknowledge it happened and then let's move on.

MR. COBB: I literally hear my editor in my head saying, Jelani, you should write about this. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: But if we write about it, it needs to be framed in terms of telling people what to do. My issue is if it becomes a 24/7 recitation and, again, this beating of our breast saying, oh, my god, he's done this terrible thing, it either will or will not be. I mean, he's like the Schrödinger's cat of politics. And more than likely -- sorry, I'm about to go down a spiral. (Laughter)

My point is there is no necessity to give this more airtime than today. Because it will either be thwarted by our laws or it will be made real, in which case they need to be prepared for the consequences. And I'll get to 2020 in a second.

Discouraged? No. Look, I liken my current state to Bruce Banner in The Avengers movie when Captain America --

MR. COBB: You are racking up nerd points here. (Laughter)

MS. ABRAMS: I am a big nerd. But, you know, there's this scene in The Avengers movie where Captain America or someone asks Bruce Banner how he becomes the Hulk, how he turns it off and on, and he kind of gives this glib answer. And then at the end when they're fighting the invaders Captain America urgently says, you know, I need you to turn into -- you've got to become the Hulk, you need to get angry. And he's like, he turns around with this half-smile and he's like I'm always angry.

I'm always angry. (Laughter) What was done in 2018, I am livid about it. I am sad. I believe that there are good things that we could be doing in the state of Georgia that will not happen because someone did not do his job or manipulated the power in his job to get a job. I can't prove that I would have won, but I promise you I probably would be right. And in lieu thereof I'm -- but I'm more angry about the thousands of people who showed up for the first and were told that their votes were invalid. I'm angry about those who might decide not to vote ever again because this was so grotesque. And that makes me mad.

But as I said earlier, I try to turn my anger into actions, so Fair Fight Action

exists. We're going to do work on the Census called Fair Count. It's motivating me to do even more. And one day I'll decide -- you know, by the end of March I'll decide what political office I want to run for.

But no, I'm not discouraged from action. I am encouraged that I have more work to do and that's my job. And part of that is making sure that we win in 2020.

The way we win in 2020 is that we have to remember Democrats did not lose to Trump. We failed to show up. And there were legitimate reasons for that failure: voter suppression, the approach taken to actually trying to encourage people to vote. We did not do the hard work, and I'm using the royal "we." The apparatus of winning an election in 2016 was flawed because too many people did not hear themselves reflected in the narrative or they were not directly encouraged to turn out and vote, and we lost by 70,000 votes through an artificial system called the Electoral College.

But Wisconsin is now run by a Democratic governor. Michigan is run by a Democratic governor. Pennsylvania's run by a Democratic governor. We know how to turn out Democrats in those communities. And if we add Georgia and Arizona to the mix as competitive states, which I believe we have proven we are, we have a buffer.

And so my responsibility in 2020 is to make sure that Georgia delivers 16 electoral votes to make certain that a Democrat wins. Because I think if we run smart campaigns that value every voter and treats all voters with respect, but are grounded in our values and not a pretense that we hold the other side's values -- you cannot pretend to be someone who has a different ideological base and that's what's happened in years past. I actually don't think that's what Secretary Clinton did, but this pretender to the throne approach cannot work.

We have to have authentic candidates who tell the truth. People may not agree with you because most people didn't agree with everything I said, but they trusted that I was telling the truth and that's why they showed up, and that's how we win in 2020.

(Applause)

MR. COBB: To your point about people who have been taken for granted, it's shocking for you to be the first black woman nominee for governor in a Democratic Party whose most reliable base is black women.

MS. ABRAMS: Yes.

MR. COBB: Yeah, you should -- that's a question.

MS. ABRAMS: Yeah. It's like yay.

MR. COBB: I mean, you don't want to talk about that happening, right, right. But how does that happen? And are black women voters being a category that's been taken for granted in a larger group that's been taken for granted?

MS. ABRAMS: You take for granted the most reliable thing. You assume your car's going to turn on every time you go outside. And when something goes horribly wrong, you don't check -- once you check all the systems and you find your tire pressure's low, but your engine is dead, you're going to fix the engine. You'll eventually get to the gas station and inflate the tires.

Black women have been the tires of the car for a long time because we're generally reliable. And when we cut out, it's not with the drama of everyone else because we've never done it. We don't just stop. We do it all the time because we understand I think more acutely than almost any community the consequence of inaction. But the reality is we also require the care and feeding and the investment and the acknowledgement of our reliability.

But running for office is hard. It's expensive, it's complicated, and it's mean. I had more friends break my heart in this campaign than the worst thing said about me by the Republican National Committee. And it was people who have known me for years who said, you know, we think you're the best-qualified candidate, but you're a black woman. Like they were whispering it to me like they're giving me a diagnosis. (Laughter) Like I've seen me, I know.

But I say that to say that it is insufficient to thank black women. You have to

invest, you have to support, and you have to vote for them. That's how it works. (Applause)

MR. COBB: Okay, speed round. We'll get these last three questions in here. And if you talk like an auctioneer, we can make this happen.

All right, so there's one person who has like a booster section here. So one, then in the green here, and then like a young person.

MS. ABRAMS: The woman in the gray has had her hand up since I walked in the room.

MR. COBB: Okay. All right, so the woman in the gray and the woman on this side and the woman in the green right here.

MS. ABRAMS: And we need to be diverse, so there's a gentleman standing on this side.

MR. COBB: Okay, well. (Laughter) See, we're all in favor of inclusion here.

MS. ABRAMS: There you go.

MR. COBB: All right, but please ask your questions --

MS. ABRAMS: But you need to ask a really good question because I just used all my clout, man. (Laughter)

MR. COBB: Ask succinctly as you possibly can.

MS. REID: Hello. Hi, I'm Sheika Reid. I am the national committeewoman for the D.C. Young Dems. And I would first like to thank you for all of your work and everything that you've accomplished and the example you've set for us.

But also, I'd like to know how can we be supportive of Fair Fight from D.C.? What can we do? How can we bring young people down? Just what's next?

SPEAKER: Hi, I'm a journalist with WhoWhatWhy.org and we did a lot in Georgia to expose some of the voter suppression there. You answered, I think, the question about why this -- shouldn't this even be a bigger priority for Democrats, all Democrats? We don't really hear that much about voter suppression in the larger Democratic Party

discussion.

MS. MITCHELL: Hi, my name is Shireen Mitchell. I'm founder of Stop Online Violence Against Women. And my question is about disinformation. How much do you think that --

MR. COBB: I'm sorry, say the name of the group one more time.

MS. MITCHELL: Stop Online Violence Against Women.

MR. COBB: Stop Online Violence Against Women.

MS. MITCHELL: Yes.

MR. COBB: Okay.

MS. MITCHELL: We focus on disinformation and social media campaigns that discourage people to get out to vote. How much do you think that that was part of what was happening for you on the ground in Georgia?

SPEAKER: So as you decide among the approximately 72 people who are running for President on the Democratic side in 2002, I'm not asking you to endorse anybody, I'm just asking you which criteria or considerations you're going to weight most heavily as you consider all those different candidates.

MS. ABRAMS: Okay, number one, the answer is that we need you sign up at FairFightAction.com. We will share information about what's going on and it's directly linked to the next question, which is that the most important issue is that we have to raise awareness of voter suppression as an issue. We are using Georgia as ground zero because it is the most perfect encapsulation of what's happening, but it is not the only place.

And so D.C., I mean, you guys would like to be a state, I think. (Laughter) It matters who gets elected around the country and that means you have to have fair elections around the country. And so sign up at FairFightAction.com and we'll tell you all the things we need you to do both small and large.

Yes, we have to talk more about it. Part of the reason I was on Seth Meyers last night, I'm with Dr. Jelani Cobb today, and I will be everywhere is that I believe we have

to make this a larger conversation. We've been taught to think that it's pitying ourselves to say that suppression is the issue. And if you read all of the responses to my State of the Union response, most of them decry that this was true. In fact, there's some new study that's saying voter ID laws don't hurt you, therefore, voter suppression isn't real.

Number one, that's a tautological argument that has no merit. But the larger issue is that they know it's real and, therefore, they're afraid that we'll keep talking about it. So our response has to be the exact opposite of what we do about the national emergency. We actually do need to talk about this all the time, every pundit, every journalist, every election, every day. Because voter suppression doesn't happen on Election Day alone. It happens between elections and on elections and, therefore, we have to talk about it every day.

You wanted to --

MR. COBB: The criteria of -- right.

MS. ABRAMS: Yeah, (inaudible).

MR. COBB: Right.

MS. ABRAMS: Disinformation, I will say this, they lied about me on television. It was less about going online to do it. But I do think disinformation campaigns do suppress the votes in a lot of communities, less by giving disinformation about the candidate and more about giving bad information about how elections work.

And so that's why I talk about voter suppression is not only an apparatus of rules, it's also a psychic effect. And that's the piece that we have to be so aggressive about, making sure people aren't despondent about voter suppression, they're angry about it. If you're angry, you do something. If you're despondent, you curl up in bed. And so we need people to be angry about voter suppression and out there acting.

Here's my criteria. One, we need to be authentic. I may not agree with everything you say, but do not pretend on Thursday that you didn't say something on Tuesday. (Laughter)

Number two, have a clear vision for where you want the country to be and be willing to say it out loud. I talked about issues in my campaign that no one had heard about. And not everyone agreed with me, but they knew where I stood.

And that's -- if you want someone to follow you, they have to trust that they know where you're leading them. You have to talk to everyone. Anyone who says that they don't see color, that they don't understand that gender matters, anyone who decries identity does not deserve to have the identity of President. (Applause)

MR. COBB: I think that's the perfect summation. So can we thank Stacey Abrams again?

MS. ABRAMS: Thank you. (Applause)

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