

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

A CONVERATION ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE  
OF BLACK POLITICAL POWER IN THE SOUTH

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PARTICIPANTS:

MODERATOR: TERRANCE WOODBURY  
Democratic Pollster Partner  
HIT Strategies

MELANIE CAMPBELL  
President and CEO  
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation

KAREN CARTER PETERSON  
Senator  
Louisiana State Senate

DEBORAH SCOTT  
Executive Director  
Georgia Stand-Up

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WOODBURY: Good afternoon everyone. My name is Terrance Woodbury, and I'm so excited to be here today. Thankful to all of you for joining us at the Brookings Institution for "A Conversation on the Political Power of Black Americans in the South."

Again, my name is Terrance, I'm a partner at HIT Strategies and I'm particularly honored to be here as an alumni of the Brookings Institution, Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, which, you know, they share a little bit of sibling rivalry here, so don't tell them that my first time back at Brookings was with the fantastic Governance Program.

We're excited to talk more about how Joe -- how Black voters really did determine the outcome of this election in so many ways. How Joe Biden's win, how the South Carolina Democratic primary, his general election win, in general, I'm sorry, and Georgia, and historic elections of Reverend Warnock and Jon Ossoff in the run-off in Georgia to determine the balance of power in the U.S. Senate.

The high Black voter turnout reflects the extraordinary years, long work of on the ground organizing efforts and changing demographics of the South, rapidly changing demographics of the South.

Today we'll be talking about those organizing efforts across the South. The challenges that remain with efforts to suppress Black voters across the South, the role that Black voters have played in key political gains, and changing demographics across Southern states.

I'm delighted to be joined in this conversation by a few women that I admire, that can really, really teach us about how the power of Black voters is changing the political landscape of the South, and how their work and career and service has been contributing to that rapid change.

First is Melanie Campbell, the president and CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. We're also joined by Senator Karen Peterson, hey Senator. She represents the 5th District in the Louisiana State Senate. And rounding this fantastic group out is Deborah Scott, who is the executive director of Georgia Stand-Up.

We are going to learn a lot from these women today. We would certainly welcome audience questions for the panelists. And we'll get to some of those questions towards the end of our

hour. If you'd like to submit a question, please do so by emailing [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu), or you can tweet your questions to @BrookingsGov. Thank you all. And with that, let's kick off the conversation.

You know, we at HIT Strategies, we've conducted a lot of focus groups and polling to understand the political attitudes and behavior of some of the hardest to reach communities. We did a lot of that across the South throughout the 2020 cycle and since. And one thing that we really started to learn was how the 2020 cycle has been characterized by the pain and the power of Black voters. Pain and frustration is often demoralizing to low propensity voters. You know, cynicism and frustration often reduces likelihood. But in 2020, many of the groups that were closest to the pain expressed their greatest political power.

I'm going to start with you, Senator. How do we continue converting the pain that so many in our community are feeling during these tough times? How do we continue converting that pain into political power in future elections?

SENATOR PETERSON: Well, thank you for having me, Terrance and certainly thank you to Brookings for putting the panel together. It's important work in a discussion that is ongoing, so I'm glad we're starting it early and not wait until the midterms to do it.

But to answer your question, I mean, for low turnout and high value voters we tend to acknowledge oftentimes their pain and their frustration, but we fail to acknowledge that they've become desensitized to it, you know. And I think part of the solution is accepting and recognizing that pain, but we can convert it -- and when we do that we that will help us to convert the pain into power.

We have to ensure that we have an ample supply of the ladder, I should say the former. The way we do this is by empowering voters with safe and affirming spaces, to share and acknowledge their painful experiences and educating them on their ability to do it, and do something about it.

And so invite them to not have to be so strong for the sake of being strong, but instead to be vulnerable. It's so hard for us to be vulnerable sometimes in order to gain that power through their vote. And what happens is, by doing this, we make sure that the issues and the hope for solutions are in the voters' minds, in their hearts, and for future elections. And I think that's how, that's how we take all of

this history that we've learned.

MR. WOODBURY: Melanie, would you, you know, you do a lot of work with Black women who expressed a tremendous amount of power in this election cycle. And really have been credited with delivering victories up and down the ballot for candidates that that support a Black agenda. How did -- how do Black women convert what was considered, you know, a lot of pain and frustration from this cycle pain, from protests that we saw during the summer following George Floyd's death or murder, pain from being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and the way this pandemic has been ravishing the Black community, but also the economic pain that so many Black women feel through the economic crisis caused by this pandemic? How -- what were some of the tactics that were used to achieve the level of historic turnout that we saw most Black women in this cycle?

MS. CAMPBELL: Well, thanks Terrance, and it's great to be here with you and my sisters -- what we call here my sis-star leaders. And thank Brookings and Nicole and her team all for the invitation to have this conversation. The shortest answer I will give is that we owned our power. The -- and unapologetically. And we didn't just start in 2020. In that we took that power and made more demands, I was going to say, in my lifetime. It's not that Black women have never owned it, because we're on the shoulders of those who did. Right. But in our time, we said, we elected President Obama twice, we did all these things, we tried to warn people about the former president, we did all of these things. And we were showing that and we were setting alarm bells off.

But within this I think in this last three years, four years especially, a real reckoning that we decided as Black women, some of that was organic, some of that was through organizing that we have to do that. We, the role we play in our families and in our communities, really is that the pain and promises itself, right. The responsibility of it. But also saying this is an asset we're going to use not just for ourselves but for our communities, for our families, for this nation. We knew we had -- needed to help save our democracy. But at the end of the day, we want and we're demanding, that's why when the -- our now 46th president said he was going to pick a woman automatically, organically and strategically said -- we said, it needs to be a Black woman.

Why? Because of the role we played, and this is just factual not partisan, because you know I'm a 501-C3 led organization. But the realities is our realities, Black folks vote more for the Democrats and Black women drive that vote. We are that secret sauce. So, we just, at the end of the day, Terrance, we owned it, and then we're continuously owning it even now as we've been struggling through some of these things happening on Capitol Hill today.

MR. WOODBURY: And Deborah, you know, the world watched as Georgia made history. You know, while I know that that was a collective effort of a lot of people, I know Melanie and Karen both spend a lot of time in Georgia. I still got my Warnock sign over there.

Can you tell us, can you shed some light on the process behind that magic? How did that magic actually come to be? What were the types of coalitions that were necessary? What were the types of groups that you had to have at the table to achieve what, you know, a lot of people don't know this; by the Georgia runoff Black voters had turned out 90% of their November turnout from 30 days prior. That, in comparison, I've done a lot of Georgia runoffs, I cut my teeth in Georgia politics back at Morehouse. In comparison, Black term -- Black runoff -- Black turnout in a runoff is typically 50% or less.

MS. SCOTT: Or less.

MR. WOODBURY: Or less, significantly less, right. We've seen a 28%, 32%. So, how did we achieve 90% turnout in a runoff coming five days off of the holiday season?

MS. SCOTT: Well, Terrance, first of all, thank you for having us, and Brookings, thank you for having us. We're excited because we know that Black women, as Melanie says, is the secret sauce, right. Part of the coalition strategy is really building coalitions where people are. All politics are local. There are already coalitions on the ground that were doing amazing work for years. This was not a coalition of the willing that just popped in and decided we're going to work together for voter registration, we were already working together.

Part of the work that we do with the Black Women's Roundtable under Melanie's leadership is to really build these infrastructure capacity pieces with these coalitions. So, Georgia Stand-Up is a part of a number of coalitions. But most of the strongest coalitions that we're a part of are

coalitions that are led and run by Black women.

And we understand from a different perspective to the point of questioning of your pain versus power. When we're talking to people at the doors and on the phones, we're asking them about what their pain points are. And how do you turn those pain points into policy? So, when we're talking to Ms. Johnson, we're talking about, first of all how are you doing and how's your family? And have you had a COVID-19 test? And do you know where mutual aid organizations are?

We don't start by saying go out and vote. We start by saying, "How are you doing, what are you doing?" And that's the difference between, I think the Southern way, in terms of organizing, is we start where people are. So, if they're dealing with kitchen table issues, the economy, someone losing their job, lack of affordable healthcare, lack of affordable jobs or good jobs, we're talking to them about why that is a policy issue. It's not just a pain point. It's a policy issue.

When you're upset about something that's happening in your neighborhood that's, there's a policy solution for that. And if someone's responsible for that -- so we try to get them to understand that every problem actually has a solution. And as an elected official that works for you that could help make your life better.

So, that was an easier point of entry in terms of this political discussion with the communities that we dealt with because we're dealing with them one on one. It was about them, it wasn't about who was at the top of the ticket or even who was on the second level of the ticket, because we're nonpartisan as well. What it was, was it was about putting the voter in the driver's seat and letting them know that they have power.

We shared with them every step of the way that you have the power to make these decisions, you have the power not to just get yourself registered to vote but to get everyone in your family registered to vote. It's up to you. And then we did a lot of checking back to make sure people did what they said that they would do.

But when you're working with coalitions, you know, the beautiful thing about this past election season is you didn't have to give anyone a pep talk to say, you all need to work together. It was,

we knew instinctively that the only way we can win is if we work together. So, if you do poster -- poll work better, if you do voter registration, if you do social media, whatever your strength is, do that. And let's see where the gap is.

And so the other thing is, when people came in to help, they were able to ask us all what you needed. Because we all had plans. And we, because we had thoughtful plans that we had strategized with and we had organized around, it was easy for other people to kind of see into what we were doing. Because we were on the ground for 10, 15, 20 years. We knew our communities, we knew what we were doing, and all we needed was the capital to do so.

MR. WOODBURY: Absolutely. You know, when I -- during my time at Brookings, I was a student of a fellow here named Bill Frey, who was one of the country's leading demographers. And he published a book called "Diversity Explosion" that really began to explore how demographic shifts around the nation were reshaping politics, specifically reverse migration. The reverse migration of Black people to the South. You know, Georgia is an example of the political potential of this reverse migration. Georgia being one of the fastest diversifying states in the union.

I think the second or third fastest only behind Arizona and New Mexico. But what's different in Georgia is that what's causing the rapid shift in demographics are Black people. Not Black and Brown people, not people of color, its Black people, coming back to Georgia. But we see very similar trends across the South, in Louisiana, South Carolina, North Carolina. So, Senator Peterson, as the Chair of the Democratic Party of Louisiana, how, what lessons did you extract from Georgia to make those demographic shifts, the same destiny in Louisiana as we saw in Georgia?

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, no, really good question. And good points you're bringing up, Terrance. I think, you know, there's certainly a lot of people in Louisiana who are very excited. And that's the question I get the most. I served as Chair for the last eight years from 2012 to 2020. And they say, "Well, how can we do, Senator Peterson, how can we do what you -- what happened in Georgia, with Stacey, with Deborah, with Latasha, with so many others leading the way?" And I tell them that that didn't happen overnight. And that there are some economic differences. We

have a very impoverished state in Louisiana, and the economy in Atlanta as a core, you know, urban center, but even other parts of Georgia is very different from the economic snapshot for Louisiana.

So, it is what was just said by Deborah, it is that organizing and education component that happens outside of election cycles. And so we can't wait until the midterms to be able to give really civics lessons to many people who don't know the difference between their local, state and federal government and what the roles of each of those elected officials are. And also showing them how to not only participate in elections, but hold government officials accountable.

And so I think if we do that, we will be able to change what is happening in Louisiana, across the South and even beyond. Because even though you have a lot of blue states, there are a lot of people in those blue states that also need to be empowered and educated about, you know, the power of action in their vote. So, I think that that's what I will say to that. There's a lot of excitement, but there's a lot of work to do.

MR. WOODBURY: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, when we conduct polls and focus groups, specifically with nonvoters, a group that's often ignored in research, that not enough resources are invested into, if we don't start understanding why they don't vote, how are we ever going to get them to vote. But when we do conduct research with nonvoters, the number one reason, especially for young people of color to not vote, is because they don't think their vote will make a difference. That's cynicism that they just don't trust the system anymore. How do we use the impacts of the 2020 election cycle, where we activated so many young voters for the first time? So many people of color that had been out of the process, how do we use -- they made the difference, right? The same folks who thought their votes didn't make a difference, well they just did it.

They did in Georgia a couple of times. They did it, you know, across the across, the nation in battleground states and battleground districts. How do we take the victory lap? How do we take the wind that they just contributed to, to demonstrate to them that they actually do hold the power and that their votes actually made this difference? I'll open that up to the panel.

MS. CAMPBELL: Deborah, you want to start that?



MS. SCOTT: Yeah. So, one of the things that we did was we actually empowered the young people that we're working with. We're a part of Black Women's Roundtable, but we were also a part of Black Youth Vote. So, we gave them a budget, we gave them the problem. So, the problem was, we weren't getting enough people out to vote in their age demographic. There were actually 23,000 folks that were not eligible to vote in November, but were eligible to vote in January.

And so we have, we gave them the challenge to go after them. And so in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of a holiday season, a number of elections had already happened. How do you get them out? And so what they did is they did so many creative things, but they did their own concerts, they went to where young people were already were. They didn't try to create events and bring people to them. But what they actually did is met people where they were.

But they talked to them about their pain points and their issues. So, when we were out protesting the summer during the uprising, on the back of our shirts, they actually had QR codes with voter registration. If you want power, you also need to register to vote. So, empowering young people to come up with their own agenda. Give them a budget so that they can do what they need to do. And then let them talk to their peers.

I didn't know anything about TikTok until this campaign. I mean, they were doing TikToks all over. And these were things that they were doing that were exciting. The base, but we didn't understand them because we're of a different age group, but they knew what they were doing. So, we had to trust the young people that were around us, that were organizers, that were saying that this is what we want. Even, you know, things like taking vans out and having parties at the polls. You know, at first I was like, okay, party at the polls we've done that for years. But no, they did party at the polls. We had DJs and food and music and created this celebration atmosphere. And so taking those young people from being canvassers, we had over almost 200 canvassers. But taking those canvassers and turning them into organizing, taking that one opportunity that they had in the community and turning it in into, we're going to keep on going.

And so teaching them that that was a skill set that they learned this summer, and this

year. That it wasn't just a one off thing so you could make money, it was a part of making the democratic process. So, even this Friday, we're having a debrief with them to talk about what they did on the ground so they understand, when you do this, it gets you that. So, every action has a reaction. And then we want to keep them engaged. Now, it's about getting them educated and making sure that they understand that all politics are local. We're getting ready for the mayor's election. All the municipal elections are this year. And so we'll be able to demonstrate their power even more on a local level. So, keeping them engaged is also the thing that we have to do right now.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, to Deborah's point, I think, you know, meeting them where they are, can't reiterate that enough. One of the hot things here in Louisiana is bike and vote. And there's so many -- there multiple organizations --

MS. SCOTT: Yes.

SENATOR PETERSON: -- that are just pulling out your own bicycle and meeting up with folks to learn about who the candidates are. And then on election day, all throughout early vote, actually going together. So, that collective action, that collective spirit, about engagement in your own communities is something that I think has resonated. And I hope that we continue it.

Conversations at coffee houses, because of the pandemic, a lot of people are spending more time outside, when you can, and the weather's not bad of course. But meeting at neighborhood parks and talking about the issues and having hosting events in the community with your neighborhood association to talk about the issues that are important. And just sharing information.

MS. CAMPBELL: Terrance, one of the other things and that Deborah did, and other states too, but was also for the young people to have the opportunity to challenge these candidates when they were running. And knowing what their issues are. And being a part of the research we conduct. You know, Deborah, and others who helped do the exit polling, we know what young people vote for, just like we said, what Black women were voting for, we knew what generation Z and millennials wanted.

And they're not too far off when it comes to the issues were really engaging. So, when the pandemic hit a lot of things changed about how to get it done. So, how to use more technology and

host more things online. But having them to host their own candidate conversations, right, and engage the candidates and then push them on the issues that they care about. And so that, I just wanted to add that little piece there, really important.

MR. WOODBURY: Absolutely, very, very important. You know, it struck me on January 6, while I was still in Georgia, watching the insurrection. You know, it struck me that in fact I wasn't watching the insurrection, I was watching Reverend Warnock's victory lap. You know, him being on TV talking about what it took the overwhelming sacrifices that were made for him to achieve the victory that he did. And they had to cut him off of TV, to cut to the insurrection. And, you know, I don't think the connection of those things has been made enough. That the reaction of January 6 was as much to, you know, disrupt the outcome of an election as it was a response to January 5.

SENATOR PETERSON: Exactly.

MR. WOODBURY: And to a lot of Black people presenting, and people of color, presenting their political power. What lessons should we learn from January 6th, and how has that changed the way that we engage the communities that we are -- that we all work in?

MS. CAMPBELL: So, I want to say, and I know this is Brookings, so I'm going to be careful. But Black people were not surprised, it was a frustrating moment. But what it did, January 6, and if we don't own what, that what happened in a real way, and try not to sweep it under the rug, then we still haven't moved this country any further. That race -- issue around racism and white nationalism has never left this country. And so the election of Georgia, I believe exacerbated. That's not a partisan issue, that's a factual issue that you had a Black man and a Jewish young man, change the power dynamic. This is factual, not partisan.

It added the fuel to what was already there. From the top of the highest office in the land, but it wasn't new. It just was exacerbated to a point that we saw January 6.

So, my frustration, personally, was because I personally was excited about what happened the day before in Georgia, personally, right. That when I saw it, we were all saying, "Oh my God I wonder how this is going to impact what's going to happen on January 6?" It wasn't a surprise.

So, what my concern, Terrance, more is like right now is after all this happened last year with the unrest and uprising globally was impacted by Black Lives Matter movement that was global, that we're clear, that we have to just address systemic racism in this country.

January 6th, was just another reminder of what hasn't been dealt with in this nation. And so it's my hope that we find a way for all that was done to ensure that the Black vote turned out, and we did have a major impact on shifting power in this country. That's the fact not a partisan.

Is that will the folks who benefited from that keep their word and address the issues that we're concerned about? Number one, dealing with systemic racism. Number two, dealing with criminal justice and police reform. Of course, number three COVID-19. And these are life and death issues. And racism is a health hazard in this country that is impacting our democracy for all of us. Get in trouble.

MS. SCOTT: Well, I think you're right, Melanie. I mean, you know, racism is a public health crisis, right. And so not just here in the South, but you can see it more here in the South because of the legacy of slavery. We cannot talk about the power of the South or the history of the South without being students of the history of the South.

The fact of the matter is, this is a slave state. It began as a slave state and will continue until we stop it, right. And so when we talk about what happens to Black people in a state like Georgia, we're in the middle of a voter suppression legislative session. I mean, there's 20 bills right now in terms of the backlash of what happened in this election, just to suppress our vote.

So, we know that every action has a reaction. We know that every time there's progress made there's going to be those that kind of pull us back. And so that's part of understanding history. It happened to during Reconstruction in the Civil War and it's happening now.

But it's incumbent upon this Administration that benefited from that former slave labor, slave institution of slavery, the descendants of slaves, are now in positions of power, and help to put people in positions of power, it's incumbent upon them to really share an equity conversation. It's like those that have benefited the most should now step back and let those who have not benefited from the American dream that have helped to save democracy they need to be first.

So, whether that's talking about vaccine equity, or affordable housing, or reparations, or the, you know, the George Floyd Bill, we want to make sure that now that it's clear that Black people help with this, that we need to make sure that we get our fair share of the pie and we need it quickly.

Whether these appointments are happening as we're looking at today. We want to make sure that there's just not one Black person in the Capitol, or one Black person in the White House, we need every single office in every single department to be looked at from an equity lens and who is in charge, who's making those decisions and how do we make sure that Black people actually benefit?

SENATOR PETERSON: Well, said. So, I think that the -- we have done something pretty amazing for this fallout reaction to be so heinous in their response. So, I just say when you're talking about the victory lap, and what happened. and the reaction, the next day the reaction. I was driving from Georgia back home to New Orleans on January 6. And, you know, husband in the car and two other folks. And they were showing me pictures. I was like, "Oh that had to be photoshopped, right?"

But the fact is that, you know, there are always peaks and depressions in the political arena as, you know, as far as what we can achieve through our collective vote, and what we can lose in the absence of that vote, right.

And I think that this 2020 victory lap, although it was very short lived not even 24 hours for us, because we had to deal with the insurrection, it was most certainly a peak moment. And it makes us -- that insurrection makes us appreciate the victory even more.

And so I believe that sometimes you can use the opposition to fuel, I think Melanie referenced this, to fuel where we go moving forward. And I see that's where the opportunity lies in taking that opposition and what, their reaction to it was only because of our work, our collective work across this country, and certainly those of you in Georgia. So, we've got to be able to turn that into power.

MS. SCOTT: Absolutely.

MR. WOODBURY: Yeah, let's stay there for a second, because I'm afraid that January, the insurrection of January 6 is going to be with us for a very long time, you know, so let's just spend a little bit more time unpacking what it means, how it's changed us.

And I think you're right, Senator, in a lot of the research that we've been doing around the insurrection, that defending democracy, you know, was not the most mobilizing, rally cry for Black voters. And what we discovered in focus groups, that's something that you all know way too well, that Black voters frankly have mixed results from democracy.

And so they sometimes have mixed attitudes towards democracy as a mobilizing principle. But when we started to mobilize them around defending their votes, right that the votes that they were objecting to on January 6 were in Atlanta, and Philadelphia, and Milwaukee, and Detroit. A lot of Black votes they're objecting to, right.

And so I want to, I just want to piggyback on what the Senator said, and how do we use the, that insurrection, that moment that's burned into the memories of so many people, how do we use that to convey, to demonstrate just how much power they have? Just how much of a reaction, you know, the other side is willing to take to deny their power.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, I mean let me just quickly hit this. That you can't separate what happened on January 6th, from what Melanie said, which is the promotion of white supremacy. So, we can't walk away from that. And Deb said that as well.

I think that the first step that we have to do to make sure that we inspire and motivate Black communities, but also protect those communities, is holding the attackers responsible and accountable. We can't let it just slide that, you know, Donald Trump wasn't, you know, wasn't convicted, which he should have been. I'm glad to see all of the action across the country with DA's and AG's, trying to continue to take action to hold him accountable. Not just for that day but for four years of mayhem.

We have to arm our communities of color with power, and the power of knowledge. We got to continue to educate them about their rights and what is at stake, which is that democracy, human rights, and make sure that future generations are prepared for that. And so we can't accept that. I mean we need a fully functioning democracy and republic and Black and Brown communities more than anyone else. And that's what we fought for, even if it wasn't as obvious in our organizing, in our messaging.

But it's, you know, we like to wave the flag too, it's not just other folks that like to wave the

flag. And we're proud of being Americans, African Americans. And I think that it's something that we should promote more, and really stay tuned to justice for all.

I mean we talk about economic justice, environmental justice, reproductive justice for women, and freedom, and criminal justice reform. But I think that we should, you know, find better ways to make sure we educate our communities of color.

MS. SCOTT: I think that's so good and so timely. I look back on the insurrection and I compare it from the insurrection to the uprising, and what we called it here in Atlanta was the uprising that happened in June. And I saw the treatment of the way that, you know, several of us were kettled and detained. You know, I was on the front line trying to help the students not get arrested, and they ended up detaining me.

But part of the issue was the way that the National Guard and the police treated the protesters. Here we had peaceful protesters here in Atlanta, that were just demonstrating and exercising their right to demonstrate. And they weren't doing anything, right, but just speaking their mind.

But where you had another group of people that could take over the Capitol and to vandalize the Capitol and use the American flag to kill someone, to hit somebody, to hurt someone. I mean it was just tragic. And in I remember, and I actually, you know, we had a film crew here and they caught me on tape, because I was like, "If they were Black people, they would be dead." Right. And that was the first reaction that most of us had. Like, "Oh my gosh look what they're doing. And why aren't the police doing what they're supposed to do?" If that was us the reaction would be different.

So, we have to go to that and to study the reaction from both movements to say, what did they do right and what did they do wrong? And if we're all Americans, how were Americans treated when they were just fighting for their civil rights versus other Americans that were actually taking over the Capitol.

So, I mean, we always have a tale of two cities, two sides to every coin. But this time, I think part of what we need to stress is we have the receipts. It's clear what we've done. And we have the receipts saying that we helped to bring voters out and we need what is due. Which means we have an

agenda that we want this administration to speak to, that talks about police reform and talks about criminal justice reform and talks about affordable healthcare, and talks about COVID vaccines and talks about all the things that we care about on our, in our communities, from pain to power means policy must equal where we are right now.

MS. CAMPBELL: Ditto to my sister's. The only other thing I would say is call a duck a duck, if it walks like a duck, it quacks like a duck, it's a duck. And what was there were white nationalists. They were racist. Right. And if that's not addressed in a real way, it is a life or death issue. And I say that, because when you allow for the kind of hate that has elevated the kind of domestic terrorism that our country is experiencing, and if it's not addressed, then it's only going to grow.

MS. SCOTT: Yes.

MS. CAMPBELL: That's not good for Black folks or anybody. So, we can't allow folks to forget about it. We cannot allow it to be unity at the sake of, and as a Black woman, and I'm just saying on the backs of our people, I come out of Florida. I come out of, you know, some people don't say it's the South, unless you from there, you know, it's the South.

MS. SCOTT: It's the south.

MS. CAMPBELL: The reality, I grew up around the KKK in my lifetime, right. And know as of this past four years, how that it was hidden under the rug. And folks showed back up when they saw it was coast was clear to come out from under that rock. Those folks have not gone back under the rock. They're in Florida. They're in my community where my brother still lives, and my 87-year-old aunt and uncle still live, right.

And that reality about how we have to address it. And those of us who are not forgetting about who is not, but those of us who are from the South, we've never forgot, and it's never gone away. It's only shifted. And in some cases, it was in the suites, well, you know, it's in the suites and the streets.

And so we have to really adjust to that reality. And continue to push and make demands that this is -- this thing is fully investigated. And that its addressed. And that this, when whatever the Department of Justice is put in place, that they're able to do their jobs as well. So, --



SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, two quick points. Thank you, Melanie on that. Is that the good news is Lieutenant General Russell Honoree is in charge of the investigation and that's probably one of the best decisions --

MS. CAMPBELL: New Orleans.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yes, New Orleans, yes Louisiana in the house. And he is strong. He came in here and whipped everybody into shape after Katrina. But the other thing is, I mean that's like a what if moment and warning for us to make sure that we stay present and aware. There's certainly no such thing as turning too quickly to the next election. Elections are happening locally and at the state level and we still need to show up or risk, what happened, that happening again in our absence. And so that was just a reaction to something good that we did as organizers and empowering people.

So, let's make sure we continue to do that at every level and not just wait for the next presidential election or midterm, but keep doing it every day. Because that's what they fear. They fear our power. And we've got to continue to showcase that power through our vote and action.

MS. SCOTT: Yeah.

MS. CAMPBELL: Can I add one more thing? And to be really clear, you said something as you ran down the cities, and so when we look at the fact that it was so blatant, that we want everybody's vote to count, but to Black people. So, as Black people, we can't ignore it. It's in our faces. That pain is there from that. But the power is, as you said, Karen, we're going to keep voting. You can change the rules, they're going through it in Georgia. It's like every time we rise there is a backlash. And a lot of times in our lifetimes, it has been through the disenfranchisement of our vote. So, --

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, so we need to keep them on pins and needles, and keep them scared. And as one of my friends always says, if you're scared, go to church, because that's where they belong. Keep them fearful by continuing to showcase our power through our vote.

MS. SCOTT: That's right. I mean we got to keep them on the run. These city elections are happening. I think you have an election happening now, right. And so we have to keep allowing them to realize their power. I think people didn't realize how powerful they were until these elections

really started turning around. And you know, when we would come and get our volunteers together and say, well you know you did that. And it's like we did that? I just voted? No, no, collectively, you did that. So, we have to keep reminding our people that they have power unrealized. And we have to keep doing it. So, we have to keep organizing, strategizing, mobilizing, educating and doing it over and over again. Every time we register someone to vote, we got to register five more because we know voter suppression is going to happen.

We just have to out organize. And we can. I think, you know, there's two kinds of power, organized money and organized people. We will get to organized money, because we will get to reparations and that whole discussion about what happens with this economy. But right now, the one thing we can do is to continue to organize our people. And although we're nonpartisan, we know that Warnock is already under attack, that Purdue has already announced that he's running against them. Which means that no sooner than we stop one election, we have to get ready for the next. So, that means that, you know, every single day they're going to be organizing against us, that means we have to continue to organize our people. And the thing about that's different in the way in which we organize is we do it from a place of love. We love Black people. We love our folks. And so we're going to give them what they need so that they can register to vote and so they can get out in the communities and votes safely. We're going to continue to organize around these mutual aid organizations. So, when people are giving out food or COVID-19 tests, we're going to be right there to get people registered to vote and keep doing it over and over again. I think we have the power and the time on our side. As goes Georgia goes the rest of the South. And I'm just looking forward to the whole South just turning this thing upside down.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, but we got to give people some relief. We got to give them some relief and quickly. Because the pain in this, during this whole election cycle was just rising and rising, and not having those stimulus checks, people trying to navigate virtual learning, childcare and schools opening one week and closed the next week, losing your job and not having an income. That stuff, we got to show them the benefit and the results of their engagement quickly. And so hopefully that happens.

MS. SCOTT: Yeah.

MR. WOODBURY: Yeah, and I do think that's a part of the victory lap that we have to take care is showing them, look you did it and because you did it here's what's, here are the results. Here's -- and those results got to start in a COVID relief package. You know, we have to turn to some audience questions here. But I would be remiss not to talk about voter suppression. Deborah, you brought it up a couple of times. You've all acknowledged the fact that when we make advances they clap back, right. They definitely return in more aggressive ways to reduce that power. You know, one thing is very -- another unique thing about Georgia. When we do national polls we typically find amongst Black voters that voter suppression is issue number 14 or 13 on a 15-issue list, right. Amongst Black voters. That's not to say it's not important, but in a forced choice, there's a whole lot of other things that are more important.

MS. SCOTT: Yeah.

MR. WOODBURY: But one thing that's very unique in Georgia and I like to say you know, Georgia has an intimate relationship with voter suppression. On that same list of issues 1 to 15, voter suppression is number four. Only after racism, COVID-19 and healthcare.

MS. SCOTT: Yeah.

MR. WOODBURY: And so that just shows you how urgent of an issue voter suppression is in Georgia. They had a, you know, they have an intimate relationship with Brian Kemp's efforts to disenfranchise Black voters. And so they're more vigilant as a result of it. How do we talk about voter suppression, well one, what type of voter suppression efforts are starting to creep up in the states that you all are working in that we need to be vigilant of, and how do we combat that so that in 2022 we don't see a reversal of the political power that Black voters expressed?

MS. SCOTT: Yeah, so first of all, they're working from a playbook and they're trying it right here in Georgia and all the other states as well. But so they're trying to restrict absentee ballots and drop boxes and showing IDs. And so we have a coalition that is up at the Capitol right now. And we're having a press conference tomorrow about some of the voter suppression bills. We know that that's a

backlash. We know that it's about, you know, how do we disenfranchise the vote. But just as they're talking about voter suppression, we're talking about, you know, voter celebration, right. That we don't care what they try to do, we're going to keep coming, right. We're going to keep coming. We're going to keep coming.

And so we keep educating and exciting our folks about what is possible. So, yes, you elected a president. Yes. You elected a vice president. Yes. You elected two senators. And now guess what you get to do? You get to elect some more mayors and some sheriffs, you know. And so getting them excited about it. So, we don't focus on the negative, we're going to -- we can do two things at the same time. We can excite and get our folks excited about what's ahead and deal with, you know, some of the policy issues that are before us, and fight at the same time. And that's we'll keep doing.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, when I became, I was vice chair for four years for Voter Protection and Civic Engagement at the DNC, and I -- we were doing the work to protect the vote. But the folks in Georgia, and led of course, by Stacey Abrams in Fair Fight and so many other organizations, was really having those partners, like in Georgia, is really important. Working with, and I know this is nonpartisan, so whether it's Republican or Democrat, or whatever state parties with voter protection to be able to protect the right is really, really important. You can't do that from D.C. as a hub with one organization. It has to be the organizations and organizers on the ground, because the laws are different in every state.

And I know Melanie will probably talk, speak to that. But this election has proven that our citizens are capable of creating pressure at the local levels, to make sure that they hold the state officials accountable, like Brian Kemp, and election officials are there to be the representatives of their constituents. And that role should never include suppressing the vote in the voice of their constituents. But sometimes it does. And so we have to remain vigilant so soon after to be so aggressive and so intentional with creating impediments is something that is really alarming. Like in 30 days that's what you do, that's what you do in response to not winning an election. You go and you try to stop people from voting. And so I do believe that the local -- what Deborah said, is a lot of the answer.

MS. CAMPBELL: The only other thing I would say, is we have to push, it was yesterday, was it yesterday, correct? John Lewis' birthday and his 81st, as the kids around here say, it's his 81st day in heaven. That's what remind of kids that remind me of here. And we have to deal with the federal legislation, we're still, which what's happening they can do that, because of Chevron v. Holder, right. It's policy. And it was struck down based on a really bad, in my opinion, decision and many of us decision, Chevron v. Holder, in 2013. So, here we are really continuously every cycle of reliving that decision. And so we have this opportunity. And one of the reasons that folks -- and we did some of our research turns with folks, and you're right, voting tends to not come up. But then you ask another time you're your question, voter right still is very, very important.

MR. WOODBURY: That's right. It is.

MS. CAMPBELL: It has to be, because it's consistently being attacked. So, there's a level of connecting that to the pain, right and the solution. But right now we need to be pushing HR-1 or the different types of bills that are floating out here. But move this thing forward in a way that something happens.

And I think the part that was really important that with all that -- and we talked about it, but just reminding ourselves that we took our lives in our hands to vote. Not everybody did the bail. The physical ones stood in these lines, or had to, because of what the attack on the Postal Service, afraid to put it in the mail. So, all these barriers that were thrown at us that had there been a stronger way, well the Justice Department that we had, you know, was wanting for sure. But the reality of being able to have a strong federal legislation in the history of this country, for Black -- for our vote of being enfranchised has always had to be protected in some kind of way. Right. Since '65 --

So, that not being strong these are the effects, they can just do whatever they want to do. Joe wouldn't be able to do what they're doing, you know, have the ability to hold folks accountable through enforcement. So, these -- so this is one of those things, that if that doesn't get corrected, then it's going to just continue, we're going to always have this problem that we've had now going on eight years.

MR. WOODBURY: That's right. Well, I want to, you know, this is a bipartisan space, but

it's also a truth space. And the truth and facts are not partisan. They're not alternative, the facts are not alternative, and they're not partisan. The fact of the matter is the Republican Party and elected officials of the Republican Party, have introduced over 100 bills nationally. 100 bills to limit access to voting. That is not partisan. That is a fact. 23 of them in Georgia that Deborah is fighting right now.

And so, you know, we also have to be honest in these spaces. And so how do we -- what are some of the things that we should do -- in fact, I want to, we're running out of time, and I want to just turn a little bit to the agenda, right. We talked a lot about how Black people contributed to the outcome of this election. How Black people's pain was converted to power and how in many ways this was a distress call, right. We're celebrating the power of Black voters, but it was a distress call of a lot of people and a lot of pain. What do the same Black voters that you spent the last cycle mobilizing, what do they now need? What is the legislative agenda? What is the policy that folks have to now deliver on because Black folks did their part?

MS. SCOTT: So, I can start and just start ticking things off. Of course, the John Lewis Voting Rights Act is one that we're looking at. And we want people to pass immediately. HB-40, which is the Reparations Study Committee, the American Rescue Act, of course, the George Floyd Policing Act. And then there are some things that I think the administration really needs to do. Here in Atlanta, we're home to the Southern region, and most of the government offices. I mean we need regional convenings right now about what's happening here in the South. We need to talk about what's happening in Mississippi, what's happening in Texas, what's happening in Georgia, what's happening in Alabama, in these Southern places. So, we need a regional conversation and listening sessions. We need read regional leadership that reflects the region. Folks from this region that understands the nuances of the region, so that we can talk to them about the issues on the ground with our people. And then of course, there's a whole slew of things around affordable housing, and jobs and job security that we should talk about. But I do want to make sure that if there's only one thing that they can do after this conversation is go ahead and pass the COVID Relief Bill, the American Rescue Act, as well as the John Lewis Voting Rights Act.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, I'll add to that, if we can make sure that that minimum wage increase is inserted into our COVID Relief Package, that would be great. Because way before the pandemic, people we're not getting a fair wage. And I know, here in Louisiana, where we've been pushing to increase the minimum wage, we've not gotten it done. And if it doesn't happen at the federal level, we're going to be in a bad way for a very long time. So, hopefully, it gets done and we don't kick the can too far down the line. So, I'm hopeful that that gets done.

And then, you know, a lot of our small businesses, I'll just add, and I know that's incorporated in the \$1.9 trillion package. But our small businesses are, and disproportionately African American businesses are the ones that are closing. And they may need some loan forgiveness, with respect to those small business loans is not -- they're not going to be able to get their head above water if they have to pay those loans back. And so we were able to give the wealthiest 1% all kinds of tax breaks for four years. It's time to make sure that we take care of working families and small businesses. And I hope we do that in the form of loan forgiveness. Student loan debt relief, forgiving that student loan, those student loans, this is part of the agenda, it needs to be at the top. And further strengthening reproductive freedom so that healthcare, physical health and mental health for women in particular, who are disproportionately impacted by this COVID pandemic, get the help that they need, with the stresses associated with just raising kids and living, losing employment, and in the stresses of life in this pandemic. So, I hope some of those things get to the, get done really quickly.

MS. CAMPBELL: The only -- ditto, ditto. And then one of the things that, Deborah, you may have mentioned that and if you did, I apologize. But the issue around affordable healthcare, and the impact that COVID is having on our communities not even having access to really, really delve into the issues around access to the vaccine. But also access to the ability to have healthcare. And for me, and some of the others of us, either you or somebody you know, has been impacted by COVID. And the healthcare system is really a challenge, at the least, as far as the challenges that folks are facing. So, that's important. Economically, we still have not regained the wealth that we lost from the Great Recession. So, housing, people spend two thirds of their income just on somewhere to try to sleep at

night, right. So, those things that -- and then be bold. People voted for some bold changes.

That's not left, that's addressing real big issues that are facing this nation. And so that's what one of the things that folks, well especially like young people want. They laying their lives on the line pushing for racial justices. And so we have to -- we're expecting and being thoughtful as a southerner, trying to be polite. But we only can be polite so long.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah and to that point --

MS. CAMPBELL: And respectful and be more demanding. But we know folks do what they said they were going to do when they showed up and asked us to vote.

SENATOR PETERSON: It's the best way for people, for those things that all of us mentioned to get done is to appoint more African American women in positions of power and empower the Federal level and the regional level. It's great to have Secretary Fudge, it's great to have Susan Rice over domestic policy. But there are a lot more places --

MS. CAMPBELL: And positions.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yeah, positions particularly regionally that are even closer to the people that Deborah kind of talked about. So, I hope that we get more Black women at the table because when we're at the table we're not on the menu.

MS. SCOTT: That's right. And we win with Black women, we win with Black women.

MS. CAMPBELL: We win with Black women.

MS. SCOTT: And we build that vote, right. And so that is the --

MS. CAMPBELL: Bold power, and that's the vote.

MS. SCOTT: Yeah, and the power --

MS. CAMPBELL: The power to (inaudible).

MS. SCOTT: And we talk about, you know, this is a Black history program. I hope that we don't just have these programs during Black History Month, the shortest month of the year, but that we have these programs all the time. Because you know, we're in style right now, but next month is Women's History Month. So, we're going to just take both months and go from Black History Month to



Women's History Month, because we still have a story to tell. So, it's her story.

MS. CAMPBELL: That's right.

MR. WOODBURY: One final question here. This going to be a rapid response. And this is from Nicole from our audience. What is one thing that a busy professional, or anyone that's not a political operative that does this every day for a living, what is one thing they can do to stay engaged, to sustain this power as opposed to letting it dwindle, and then bringing it back two years from now? And this is -- I should also operate as your closing remark.

SENATOR PETERSON: Okay. I think I'll just start. I think it's encouragement. I think it's just a reinforcement and encouragement to other people in your community, your neighbors, particularly women, like what we did was great. And let's keep going. Let's keep the momentum. And just in a time when people are at home, during this pandemic, really stressed out, the mental health issues are real. I think just a note in a kind email, a text, or even a phone call encouraging people and remind them. Because we didn't have the full length victory lap, and we want it so that may be a way for us to all stay engaged.

MS. CAMPBELL: I say keep voting, if you don't do anything else. And just stay engaged as Karen was saying. And just take care, make sure if you don't do this, do your own circle. Just take care of your own circle. And know the facts and don't let anybody give you bad information. Have -- take a little time to get the facts because there's so many lies thrown out there. I hate to use that word, but it's the truth. So, that you have a better way of being able to be informed about what your power, how your power is being used. Don't want it to be misused.

MS. SCOTT: That's good. That's good. And I would say dig where you are. I mean in every, wherever you live there's a city council, there's a county commission, there are local issues that are happening. Get involved, find an organization that does social justice work that is doing good work and seed into them. Go volunteer. Work with them. But dig where you are. Get involved with the local issues that are happening in your community. And if you see somebody that is being disenfranchised, help those communities. One of the wonderful things that philanthropy did was just call you up and say,

you know, look we see what you're doing, we're going to send you checks. So, we'll take the checks too, but we want people to dig where they are and get involved.

MR. WOODBURY: Thank you all so much. I hope we would all join in a virtual round of applause for our fantastic panelists. Thank you, Melanie, Deborah and Karen. And thank you so much to the Brookings Institution, for make -- for creating spaces for these very important conversations, to discuss, to understand, to examine, but most importantly, to sustain Black political power in America. Thank you all for joining us. And have a great day.

MS. CAMPBELL: Thank you Terrance.

MS. SCOTT: Thank you, you were wonderful.

SENATOR PETERSON: Yes, thanks Brookings.

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190