

Saving our democracy

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I was catching up on some reading this week, with the TV on in the background, when I heard the journalist A.B. Stoddard warn, “We might have had our last free and fair election.” I stiffened, because I knew she was exactly right and she was sounding an alarm. A fire is sweeping the country, set in state after state by anti-democracy forces who are working to limit voting rights, interfere with vote counting and even manipulate the outcome of elections. Pay attention, because we are witnessing the most ominous threats to our democracy in our lifetimes.

This anti-democratic turn can be traced to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2013 ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted a key part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—the requirement that states with a history of discriminatory voting laws seek federal preclearance to pass new voting laws. Republican-led state legislatures wasted no time to disenfranchise low-income, young, Black and brown voters they expected would vote for Democrats, passing strict voter ID laws and restricting early voting, absentee voting and voting by mail. And now, since Donald Trump lost the last presidential election, Republicans across the country have used that loss and his lies about the election to spur the most expansive rollback of voting rights since the Jim Crow era.

This year alone, lawmakers in 48 states have introduced nearly 400 restrictive voting bills. There are bills that suppress voting, that threaten poll workers and election officials with fines and even criminal prosecution for dubious violations, and that give legislatures the power to override electoral outcomes based on unproven allegations.

The glut of bills restricting voting rights has obscured something equally, if not more, alarming: how partisan, corruptible and potentially rigged *vote counting* will be with the passage of these bills.

A proposed new voting bill in Texas—blocked by Democrats for now—gives courts more power to void election results and lowers the bar for proving charges of voter fraud. Republicans in the Arizona Senate have engaged a company with no experience in ballot counting to conduct a forensic audit to search for fraudulent ballots from the 2020 presidential election. After Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger rebuffed pressure from then-President Trump to “find 12,000 ballots” for him, lawmakers removed him as the head of the board that oversees

state election laws and gave the board new authority to intervene in local elections, such as those in heavily Democratic areas like Atlanta’s Fulton County. And don’t forget that a majority of Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives attempted on Jan. 6 to throw out some states’ electoral votes—votes that went for Joe Biden.

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What about the root cause that is fueling these efforts—Trump’s big lie that the November elections were rigged and the presidency was stolen from him? This claim has been thoroughly discredited, but it keeps being circulated and it fuels the barrage of threats and intimidation against many election officials, from secretaries of state to low-level workers. Some officials who refused Trump’s demands to alter election outcomes, including Raffensperger, have received death threats of hanging, firing squads and torture, terrorizing them and threatening the U.S. electoral system.

This is why federal action is crucial right now to keep our democracy. Over the last decade, **1 in 6 democracies have failed**. Two bills in Congress are poised to protect the sovereignty of the people. The first, the For the People Act,

which passed in the House of Representatives and awaits action in the Senate, would establish rules for federal elections that would supersede many of the state-level voting restrictions that have been or soon could be enacted. It would require election officials to automatically register any eligible voter, require early voting periods, prohibit states from restricting mail-in voting, protect against purges of the voter rolls, prohibit harassment and intimidation of election workers, beef up election cybersecurity and defense from foreign interference, and provide vital funding for elections. In addition, the bill would ban partisan gerrymandering and establish uniform rules for redrawing congressional districts.

Congress must also restore the federal preclearance requirement for states with a history of discriminatory voting laws—the requirement invalidated by the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder*. The second major voting rights bill before Congress, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, is set to do just that.

Democrats are working to find a way forward, but, with the current politics over the filibuster and Republican opposition in the Senate, both bills face an uphill climb. Whatever final form these bills take, they must protect access to the vote and the integrity of our elections.

Protecting our democratic principles is patriotic, not partisan. Our responsibility as citizens is not just to vote; it is to stand up so that everyone who is eligible can vote and every vote is counted.



Photo: AFT

Weingarten, second from left, with election volunteers in Savannah, Ga., Dec. 21, 2020.

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