



# PERSPECTIVES



by **Rinaldo S. Brutoco**

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## **Escaping Minority Rule: Voter Suppression** *Every Citizen's Vote Deserves to be Counted*

What does “voter suppression” even mean? What does it look like in real life? How bad is it? How much worse can it get? How can we ever enjoy a true democracy when citizens who are people of color, students, or ex-felons are not allowed to vote at all?

In 2018, then Georgia Secretary of State, now Governor, Brian Kemp was supervising the election he was running in against Stacey Abrams. He famously purged over 500,000 voters to provide himself with a narrow victory. Apart from how inappropriate it was for Kemp to “referee” an election he was running in, clearly, he perceived enormous electoral advantage by disenfranchising many voters he believed would vote for his opponent. Just as clearly, this is a classic case of voter suppression. The potential vote totals were intentionally “suppressed” so many voters could not vote. Simply stated, voter suppression is anything and everything which a party in power can do to “rig” the ability of certain classes of voters to actually have their vote count.

An even more stark example of voter suppression is how the State of Florida (through Amendment 4 on the 2018 ballot) voted in a general election to permit all ex-felons who had served their time and had returned to normal society (estimated to be 1,400,000 individuals), to have their voting privileges restored on time for the election of 2020. One can observe that the overwhelming number of individuals whose voting rights were to be restored were less educated, financially impoverished, people of color, and who happened to disproportionately register as Democrats.

Fearing that too many of these reformed felons would actually vote for a Democrat, and specifically, to prevent them from voting, the Republican-controlled legislature passed a law making it almost impossible to qualify to have their voting rights restored. This was accomplished by imposing impractical and possibly illegal financial requirements which violate Federal mandates that a “poll tax” (a fee required to be paid in order to vote, specifically made illegal in 1964 by the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment) can never be imposed.

Worse yet, when seeking to learn how much specifically each ex-felon would have to pay to have their voting privileges restored, they were told by state administrators that it was too complicated for the state to calculate, and the ex-felons would have to figure it out themselves. Well, that worked strikingly well. So much so that only 67,000 ex-felons actually were allowed to vote in 2020—the remaining 1,333,000 are still trying to figure it out.

The Florida example may be the crudest, but there is a myriad of other ways that Republicans in various states are now working overtime to reduce voter turnout—particularly when there is a good chance more Democrats will be adversely affected. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University released a tally just this week showing that more than 106 bills have been introduced in a total of 28 states to restrict voter access. These bills, according to the Brennan Center’s review, are specifically designed to:

- Limit mail-in voting access; 2) impose stricter voter ID requirements (and to disenfranchise students so they can’t vote by disallowing student photo IDs); 3) limit successful pro-voter registration policies; and 4) enable more aggressive voter roll purges.

New Hampshire has the distinction of introducing the most egregious suppression tool when it began debating a bill that would allow election administrators to remove voters from the rolls using data provided by other states. The courts have already held this premise violates the National Voter Registration Act.

Pennsylvania, the swing state that in large measure delivered the Biden election victory, leads the nation with 14 specific proposals before their Republican-controlled legislature that overtly seek to suppress voter turnout. New Hampshire comes in second (11 bills), followed by Missouri (nine bills), Mississippi, New Jersey, and Texas (eight bills each). Meanwhile, Georgia is actively working on making it much harder to vote absentee, pandemic or not! And, North Carolina’s

Republicans take the prize for using surgically effective, racially charged voter ID laws to suppress Democratic turnout there.

These measures attempt to limit who can vote by mail, make it harder to request an absentee ballot in the first place, restrict who can assist a voter who requires such assistance in casting their ballot, compelling “witness signatures” for absentee voting, and the old-time favorite, restrict the locations and methods allowed to be used in returning an absentee ballot. All of these devices are in addition to the oldest stand-by for targeting poor neighborhoods, minority neighborhoods, and districts where college campuses are located: reduce the number of polling places so that intolerably long lines make voting more challenging, particularly for the working poor who can’t easily vote during the day.

A major factor that has triggered the most outrageous actions by the states is the 2013 5-4 Supreme Court decision to “gut” the Voting Rights Act of 1965, saying that voter suppression was no longer an issue (unbelievable!). This released the nine worst offending Southern States from the requirement to pre-clear all voting rights matters with the Justice Department. Thus unleashed, voter suppression tactics kicked into high gear in those states, with others in the North to follow. Yup, that’s how we got to the point where millions of our fellow citizens are routinely denied fair and equal access to the ballot.

Where do we go from here? It turns out the House of Representatives in the last session adopted a comprehensive voting rights package. It’s been reintroduced into this session as the “For the People Act” containing voting rights and “clean government” provisions. The popular press often refers to this as the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, named in honor of the civil rights icon who fought for the passage of the Voting Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968.

Among other things the legislation would: permit same-day voter registration, “No Excuse” absentee voting, online voter registration, and mobile voting options; require a minimum of 30 days “early voting”; eliminate unfair voter ID laws; implement full restoration of the Voting Rights Act; restore voting for convicted felons upon completion of their sentence; require disclosure of donors to all PACs; allow public financing of elections; overturn the disastrous Citizens United Vs. FEC; and, require full disclosure of all online political purchases.

That’s how we’ll begin to escape from the tyranny of Minority Rule.