



## Stacey Abrams on minority rule, voting rights, and the future of democracy

*In 2020, democracy is on the ballot.*

Nov 2, 2020

Ezra Klein

We're one day away from the election, though who-knows-how-many days from finding out who won it. But there's more at stake than whether Donald Trump or Joe Biden will be our next president. Democracy itself is on the ballot.

Democracy has, in particular, become Stacey Abrams's animating mission. In 2018, Abrams lost the Georgia gubernatorial race by a razor-thin margin amid rampant voter suppression. Since then, as the founder of Fair Fight, she's turned her attention to the deeper fight, the one that sets the rules under which elections like hers play out. In her recent book, *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*, Abrams makes the case that the fight over democracy is the central question of our politics, with more power and clarity than any other politician I've heard.

In my view, Abrams is right. And so she's exactly the person to hear from on the eve of the election. In this conversation, we discuss the GOP's turn against "rank democracy," the role of demographic change, how Republicans have cemented minority rule across American political institutions, why we potentially face a "doom loop of democracy," the changing face of voter suppression in the 21st century, what a system that actually wanted people to vote would look like, why democracy and economic equality are inextricably linked, and much more.

One thing to note: You won't hear Trump's name all that much. It's the Republican Party, not just Trump, that has turned against democracy, and that is implementing the turn against democracy. And it's the Democratic Party, not just Joe Biden, that will have to decide whether democracy is worth protecting, and achieving. Democracy is on the ballot in 2020 and beyond, but it's not just on the presidential voting line.

You can listen to our whole conversation by subscribing to [\*The Ezra Klein Show\*](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. A transcript, edited for length and clarity, follows.

**Ezra Klein**

A few weeks ago, Mike Lee, the Republican senator from Utah, **tweeted** that "Democracy isn't the objective; liberty, peace, and prosperity [sic] are. We want the human condition to flourish. Rank democracy can thwart that."

What did you hear when you read that?

**Stacey Abrams**

I heard the quiet part out loud — a Republican Party that has abandoned its pretense of changing minds and intends to manipulate rules.

What [Lee] was saying is that if we have reached a stage where our ideas can no longer garner sufficient votes to elect us, then we just have to do what we must to ensure that *our* vision of prosperity and liberty is the prevailing vision, regardless of whether the people want it or not.

**Ezra Klein**

What do you think “rank democracy” means?

**Stacey Abrams**

I saw it as an insult. Typically when someone uses the term “rank,” what they mean is the most puerile, the most base, the least cultivated. So for him it was very much a disparaging term. This notion that the populace, the lowest of the low, get to make decisions for themselves through this act called democracy — that to him was revolting.

**Ezra Klein**

I had **George Will on this show** a while back because he wrote a book called *The Conservative Sensibility*. In it, he places James Madison’s “catechism of popular government” at the core of the conservative project. And he writes, “What is the worst result of politics? Tyranny. To what form of tyranny is democracy prey? Tyranny of the majority.”

This is the sort of argument a lot of Republican thinkers make: that democracy is a trampling of the rights of minorities by the majority. In response to **a piece** I wrote on democracy, Ilya Shapiro, the director of constitutional studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, **responded**, “So you want majorities to violate the rights of minorities (and individuals)? Because that’s what pure democracy is.”

What’s your response to the idea that the anti-democratic impulse is motivated by the protection of minority rights?

**Stacey Abrams**

There’s a dual reaction. It’s so unabashedly ... I’d use the word facile because this is an attempt to twist something that is not just anti-democratic, but anti-civil rights, and to form it into something that seems noble, which it is not.

But the second reaction is it’s a cry of loss. It’s this recognition that their ideological underpinnings no longer have salience — that they can no longer lean on this majority they created because that majority is now quickly becoming a minority. And embedded in this argument is a fear that what they have visited on others through the trampling of civil rights, through the trampling of human rights, through the exclusion of so many communities will now be visited upon the Republican Party and upon conservative thinkers.

But before getting to that, I think there is this very basic misapplication because what democracy has garnered for the last 243 years, when it has been appropriately applied, has been the expansion of rights for minorities. The expansion of inclusion. Their argument is that inclusion has become too effective. And in order to preserve their ideological constructs, that inclusion must be thwarted.

They are trying to use James Madison and his arguments to undermine the entire experiment because the outcome of the experiment no longer caters to their ideological belief systems.

### **Ezra Klein**

In your book, the election of Barack Obama is a central part of the narrative about the attack on voting rights. What did Obama's election set off?

### **Stacey Abrams**

The Obama election was proof of the fruition of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. When coupled with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act was the embodiment of the protection of the rights of the minority. It said you will be able to participate in your governance for the first time and those who would intercede or block you will be restrained from doing so.

When Barack Obama was elected, it was among the most effective elections we've ever had because it brought out communities that had long been denied access, who had long excluded themselves because they did not believe they were welcome, who had never been engaged or even invited into participation. Because of the nature of his campaign, because of the nature of his election, and, yes, because he was a Black man who represented so much of what had been done wrong in America and could be made right, his election was emblematic of what democracy could achieve.

What Republicans saw in that election was the worst nightmare of a party that refuses to meet the moment and to adapt to a changing populace. They are still governing from a space of irritation that anyone else would dare to think their voices matter. And so what we saw following [Obama's] election was the immediate retrenchment of almost any right that could be pulled back and pulled away from minority voters. Because their participation at such numbers was able to create this sea of change in what it meant to be a president in the United States.

### **Ezra Klein**

One of the things that your book emphasizes is the connection between demographic change in this country — of groups also attaining power in our democracy — and the rollback of voting rights. What seems to be happening here is a lag between the power of this rising generation and the geography of this country as it exists, the way elections are actually run as exists, and, of course, the Supreme Court.

You emphasize the *Shelby v. Holder* decision, which gutted much of the Voting Rights Act, as setting the stage for a really different equilibrium around voting rights than we had even 10 years ago. Can you talk a bit about that case and what it allowed to happen?

## **Stacey Abrams**

To understand the impact of *Shelby*, you have to first understand the nature of the right to vote in America. There is no constitutional right to vote. There have been three constitutional amendments that removed restrictions on who was permitted to vote: the 15th, 19th and 26th amendment. In the 15th Amendment, Black men were granted the franchise; in the 19th Amendment, women were granted the franchise; the 25th Amendment expanded the franchise to those 18 to 21.

But the reality is that the right to vote does not exist as an affirmative opportunity. What does exist in the Constitution is the delegation of authority for the administration of elections to states, which sounds very benign until you realize that for most of American history, voter suppression has been almost entirely the construct of states.

What the Voting Rights Act did in 1965 was shatter the impermeable nature of states to say who could and could not vote. The Voting Rights Act said you could not use race — and, by 1975, that you could not use language — as a way to preclude access to the right to vote. It said that states could not take proactive steps to block the right to vote through poll taxes, literacy tests, closing of polling places — any action that would interfere with the right of people of color, or people who spoke English as a second language, to vote. In states that had a long and storied history of blocking the right to vote, no new voting laws could be countenanced without having the Department of Justice approve.

Fast forward to 2013. By that point we'd had this extraordinary success where the Voting Rights Act not only increased the number of people who were participating in our elections, it also increased the number of people of color who were being elected to higher office. And from its very beginning, there were attacks on the Voting Rights Act because it was seen as too interventionist. It was seen as taking away states' rights to discriminate against who could participate in elections.

In 2013, the Supreme Court **eviscerated of the Voting Rights Act** with the gutting of Section 5. That was essentially a get out of jail free card for states that wanted to discriminate; what was different this time is that it was no longer relegated to those states that participated in voter suppression through Jim Crow.

You had a proliferation across the country of voter suppression techniques that had been prohibited clearly by the Voting Rights Act. That's why you saw the rapid shutdown of polling places. That's why you saw the expansion of restrictive voter ID laws. That's why in 2020, we are seeing so many cases that essentially challenge state laws designed to restrict who has access to the right to vote.

## **Ezra Klein**

The Voting Rights Act was built to deal with voter suppression specifically on the basis of race. But something I want to draw out in the argument you make there is that, in this period, while race is still a huge component of modern-day voter suppression, the Republican Party's partisan

incentives have actually *broadened* who they target as a part of these efforts. The intent of voter suppression is to promote a national party's interests, not just to protect southern racism.

### **Stacey Abrams**

Agreed. One of the reasons I always include the 26th Amendment in my litany is that some of the **most aggressive attacks on voting rights** have targeted young people. Young people are the least likely to have the types of ID that are required and have faced restrictions on the types of IDs they can use.

The most popular example is in **Texas**, where you can vote with your gun license but you cannot vote with your student ID. The **New Hampshire legislature** has attempted to restrict the domicile of students because they knew students have an impact on their elections. In Florida, Republicans **removed early voting locations** through legislation because too many students voted in the last election.

So, yes, what began as an attack on largely African Americans — and Latinos and Native Americans in Arizona — has expanded. People of color have always been the target, and then you layer on top of that young people and poor people. In that you see a coalition that has long suffered from oppression under conservative ideology and would be much more likely to access good policy if their ability to participate in “rank democracy” was real.

### **How Republicans have used the “doom loop of democracy” to cement minority rule**

#### **Ezra Klein**

Something that I worry about a lot right now is what I've taken to calling the **“doom loop of democracy.”** You have a Republican Party that increasingly wins power through winning a minority share of the vote. The president lost the popular vote. The Republican majority in Senate represents something like 15 million fewer people than the Democratic minority in the Senate. Then they appoint Republican judges to the Supreme Court, which makes crucial decisions about what forms of voter suppression and electoral rigging are constitutional.

So you have this situation where a party that wins power undemocratically uses that power to then make it easier to win undemocratically, setting off the loop again and again and again. And that can really lead a country in a deeply undemocratic direction because if you rewrite the rules of the game, then ultimately the other party has no choice but to follow them.

How serious of a risk do you think that is if Republicans are able to keep winning this way?

#### **Stacey Abrams**

It's absolutely the risk that we face.

One of my dear friends William Dobson wrote a book called ***The Dictator's Learning Curve***, and he uses this approach as one of the examples of how authoritarian populists become dictators, how they gradually accrue power. They use the systems to their benefit and when the systems no longer benefit them, they manipulate the externalities of those systems to give themselves permanent power.

In the United States, what we're watching through gerrymandering, trying to restrict access to absentee ballots during a pandemic, creating laws and rules that, by their own admission, are intended to limit access to democracy — it creates this loop where you can keep using the system to strangle democracy until, to misappropriate Grover Norquist, you make it small enough that you can drown it in a bathtub.

The challenge is that, given the structure of our system, as long as they can maintain a certain degree of power, even the overwhelming majority of Americans are insufficient to guarantee that democracy works. That's the challenge of the Electoral College. Its genesis was grounded in racism and classism, but its longevity is grounded in this notion that this is the last vestige of a type of system that will permit victory. Not to those who can win the greatest number of votes but to those who can manipulate the system to their benefit.

### **Ezra Klein**

The reason I started our conversation by focusing on the building of a genuine anti-democratic ideology in Republican and conservative circles is that this kind of thing is hard to do if it is in too much conflict with your rhetoric, or it's in too much conflict with what the people in your party believe.

When gerrymandering comes on the ballot, it often loses. You've seen red states move toward independent commissions. There are a lot of ordinary Republicans who have pretty small-d democratic ideas about how government should work. But as the party's elites become more committed to an actual anti-democratic ideology, then what seems reasonable to do in the examples we've been talking about becomes very different.

If part of your animating purpose as a party is to not allow "rank democracy" to overturn the rights of the minority — by which you mean your rights as a political minority who's losing elections to stay in power — then these things become necessary. You're waging a noble war against the mob.

The power grab here, I think, is actually driving the ideological change. But the ideological change ends up over time justifying ever more extreme versions of the power grab that would have been shocking to people, say, 10 years ago.

### **Stacey Abrams**

We know that what is being couched by Mike Lee and others as nobility and protection is nothing more than fear. Even calling it sore loser-dom underwhelmingly describes what's happening.

We know that the demographic shifts in the United States portend a very dramatic shift in the allocation of resources and power. Part of that is the fact that for so many years these communities were denied access to those resources, denied access to that power. The responsible retort to that is to invite these new persons into the shared power structure that is our democracy. That's the right thing to do. There is absolutely a negotiation that should happen about how fast

and what the remedies are, but instead of engaging in that dialogue, Republicans have decided that the answer at the macro level is simply to refuse to play the game fair.

In 2018, 65 percent of Floridians restored the **voting rights of ex-offenders**. This was not done along party lines. It was a bipartisan solution to a problem that was grounded in slavery and racism. And yet, because it was going to cost them elections, the will of the people **was absolutely ignored** by a Republican governor, a Republican legislature, and then by conservative control of our court system.

The moment the Republican Party decided that it could not win based on actually meeting people where they are, that the only way to win was to rewrite the rules of the system, and that they were going to undermine 243 years of a commonly held belief in our nation that democratic processes are a native good — that desperation has, I think, done more damage to the longevity of the party than almost anything else I've seen them do in recent years.

### **The pernicious logic of voter suppression in the 21st century**

#### **Ezra Klein**

To reiterate just how deep this has gotten, **Mike Lee** is now among **a number of elected Republicans** who has argued for the repeal of the 17th Amendment, which would end the direct election of US senators.

Of course, the reason is that Republicans are much stronger in state legislatures than they are in actual statewide elections. If you just looked at the way the legislatures are broken down now, repealing the 17th Amendment would give Republicans at least 58 seats in the US Senate. The thoroughgoing nature of the move away from democracy is bigger than people recognize.

But I want to sit in this tension between how much Republican elites have begun to turn against democracy and the degree to which that turn still conflicts with the way people understand fair elections. Something you write about really eloquently in the book is the way voter suppression now has to cloak itself in the guise of “user error” — the idea that your vote is getting rejected not because we didn't want you to vote but because you screwed up. Can you talk a bit about that?

#### **Stacey Abrams**

When I decided not to concede [Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial] election, I acknowledged the legal sufficiency of the numbers. I challenged the system that permitted those numbers to be the tote board, and I challenged the legitimacy of a system that could permit voters to be denied their rights — not because they weren't eligible but because of some failings of rules and bureaucratic restrictions.

The insidious nature of voter suppression in the 21st century is that it no longer uses the blunt instruments of law enforcement or the literacy test as obstacles to voting. Instead, you see different versions of, say, the poll tax. The poll tax is now **making ex-offenders pay fees and fines**. There's also a poll tax in making people stand in line for hours on end. In most states, you do not get paid time off to vote, which means that you have to spend what essentially amounts to

a day's worth of pay. If you're in Georgia or Texas, standing in an eight hour line, you have lost those wages and you have threatened or jeopardized your job.

But when people look at it from the outside, they say: Well, those people made that choice. It is not a choice that should be foisted upon any American to decide between keeping your job and casting a vote. But we make it the personal responsibility of each individual citizen as opposed to questioning a system that works with extraordinary fluidity in wealthier parts of the community, and works with the pace of a snail in Black and brown communities.

Another example is when **polling places close down**. When that happens, the argument is: If you really wanted to vote, you would make your way to vote. Well, if you live in a community without public transit and the one or two polling places that were near you are now 10 or 15 miles away, you physically are precluded from being able to exercise the right to vote. But that's often attributed to your failure to plan.

With **voter ID laws**, it's the most aggressive pseudo-logic that I've ever heard. America has always required that you prove who you are to vote. What is different today is not that you need ID — it's the *form* of ID you have to have. And it's the extraordinary difficulty of accessing those specific forms of ID that gets elided. People get treated as though they're just too lazy. They have the ID they need to get on a plane or buy beer but not to vote — which is completely untrue.

Those are examples of how bureaucratic rules take on the veneer of logic but have the most heartless effect, because they distract from the responsibility of the state to engage in providing the right to vote. They also convince citizens that it's either too hard, or that they were not worthy enough, and that they didn't work hard enough.

And when you do that, you not only block them from voting — you discourage entire communities from voting. Those stories become legend and that legend becomes truth. Communities decide it's not worth it because it's just too hard. And it's not that they didn't try; it is that the barriers to access were nearly impossible. And why keep beating your head against a stone wall?

## **Ezra Klein**

Something you articulate really nicely in the book is that this suppressive, unresponsive voting system creates another feedback loop.

Let's say you're a voter and you fight your way through this obstacle course. You end up waiting in line for four hours to vote a day when you've got parenting responsibilities and occupational responsibilities. And it was hot and you just sat there. And then you vote for somebody and, even though they win the majority, they don't actually get put into office; or they do but can't do anything because of the filibuster or a last minute power grab. So nothing changes for you. You did all this just to be disappointed.



I think it becomes very rational after that — when so much is being asked of you to vote and so little comes back from your vote — to begin to detach from the system. Exhaustion is a very powerful tool of voter suppression.

### **Stacey Abrams**

Absolutely. Exhaustion and despair are both incredibly legitimate reasons for not participating. There is a legitimate reason to feel despair if you've lived in intergenerational poverty and every time you've attempted to participate in the system, the response has been not simply to make it difficult but make it worthless. The solution isn't to harangue someone into voting — it is to do what you can to mitigate those obstacles.

I think that's the place where the crafty nature of the Republican Party has been situated for 20 years. They can count. They know that we have reached a demographic inflection point that is no longer simply one of numbers but numbers that have power attached to them.

That's why it is no longer feasible to simply use the traditional means of voter suppression. The nuclear option that has been employed is designed to try to meet a moment that has been predicted for 30 years but has only come to real fruition in the last decade.

### **What a system that actually wanted people to vote would look like**

#### **Ezra Klein**

What would a system that *wanted* people to vote look like?

#### **Stacey Abrams**

Oregon and Washington do it pretty well.

One is automatic registration. Not this notion of automatic registration when you go and get your driver's license and can register at the DMV. That is still making a condition of suffrage that you have to go and get an ID. Your birthright as a citizen should be your guarantee of suffrage in the United States. Therefore, it should be the government's responsibility to register you to vote automatically.

Number two is same-day registration. You should have to register to vote when you get to a new place, but you shouldn't have to time your move to figure out the deadline for showing up. You should be able to register on the day you go to vote and be able to demonstrate that you are who you say you are and you live where you say you live.

We should have automatic mail-in voting. We should have automatic access to early voting. And, of course, same-day voting. We should have voting centers. You should not have to rely on a precinct-based system because what early voting proves in every single state where it is active is that you don't have to actually go to the schoolhouse down the street from you in order to cast your ballot.

We should have voting as a holiday in addition to making certain that every person gets paid time off to go and vote. Both are necessary. The holiday recognizes that the majority of people

are probably going to take Election Day as the day they cast their ballots. But we have populations, including those who are caregivers to the disabled, who will need to be working on Election Day. You have entire populations that cannot meet a single day of opportunity. So we need to provide paid time off to go and vote.

And we need to have systems that mean that you don't have to give someone eight hours of time off to go and vote because the systems should be equitable, not equal. Equal says you need this exact same thing. Equitable says we meet you and your needs where you are. And often for communities of color, namely Black communities, the challenge is that they are still resourced at their pre-engagement level and at the last level of any attention being paid. So they have fewer resources. They do not account for surges in voting and they often have substandard equipment.

Those are the major pieces to it. There is a lot more that I could go into but those basics would transform our elections because the architecture of voter suppression is, Can you register and stay on the rolls? Can you cast a ballot? And does your ballot get counted? Same day and automatic registration take care of the first; early voting centers and making sure that people have time off take care of the second.

And the third is making certain that because we now have uniformity in the ways we vote, we then diminish the likelihood of votes being cast out. That's the most important piece: If you make it through this gantlet, you should be secure in the fact that your vote will count.

### **Ezra Klein**

We've been talking here about the way the Republican Party has become the anti- democracy party — the way they've become ideologically committed to that and have become somewhat creative in trying to to make that more of a reality.

Has the Democratic Party become the reverse? They passed **HR 1**, which is a big package of voting reforms, and **HR 4**, which is an attempt to restore key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, through the House in 2019. Are those sufficient? Do you think the party is committed to this in the way the Republican Party is committed to its opposite?

### **Stacey Abrams**

I think we are. And I think it's because the composition of the Democratic Party is antithetical to the composition of the Republican Party. The Republican Party is predominantly white. Almost everyone else are Democrats. Because we have a two-party system, that's what we have. So it's a matter of survival, I think, for Democrats to actually pay attention to the nature of how democracy should work.

One of our challenges has been that for many years we knew voter suppression was real, but we had been coached into not calling it out because the fear was if you spoke it aloud it would have the effect of dissuading voters. I grew up in the South. Voter suppression has the effect of dissuading voters. So my willingness to call it out comes about because whether you say or not, we are experiencing it and we have the responsibility to actually name the enemy and can advocate for change.

So I do think that HR 1 and HR 4, which is the John Lewis Voting Rights Enhancement Act, but also [Sen. Ron] Wyden's bill, [Sen. Amy] Klobuchar's bill — we've seen good bills that have come out during Covid that I think move us further than HR 1, because I believe automatic absentee balloting and mail-in balloting need to become the law of the land in every state.

And every state should have uniform rules. We should not have 43 cases being waged to determine if you make a mistake, you get to fix it? Do you have to find a witness in the midst of quarantine to get your ballot in? Do you have to have a notary public who is not allowed to have human contact authorize your absentee ballot?

We should use our learnings from Covid to make certain that no matter where you live in America, you have the same baseline access to democracy. If a state wants to do something to make it easier, they should be able to, but no state should be permitted to make it harder.

### **Ezra Klein**

If Democrats win the House, the presidency and the Senate, HR 1 and HR 4 will pass the House again and will die immediately in the Senate due to a filibuster. There is absolutely no chance they will get through a filibuster. And they can't go through budget reconciliation.

I thought one of the most striking things that happened this year was when Barack Obama stood at John Lewis's memorial and told the assembled Democrats that if they wanted to honor John Lewis, they should pass these bills. And if the filibuster stopped them, they should get rid of the filibuster because it has always been used to stop voting rights, civil rights, and racial equality in this country.

What do you think about the filibuster? And what would you say to Senate Democrats who say they are committed to democracy but worry that getting rid of the filibuster would undermine the political system and the comity and compromise needed to make it work?

### **Stacey Abrams**

I would refer them to the statement that opened this conversation. Mike Lee was saying the quiet part out loud. I believe in eliminating the filibuster because if we can guarantee permanent access to the right to vote in the United States, we will have the obligation at the federal level and the Senate level to actually negotiate in good faith.

The filibuster has been a useful tool, but it was only useful when people actually believed in and abided by the basic rules of the system. The Republican Party has shown itself incapable of following rules it does not like. And we cannot get to a nation where citizens get to participate in the selection of senators if we do not eliminate the filibuster to create the very baseline democracy that we require for this time.

### **Ezra Klein**

I'm going to nudge a bit on this idea that the Republican Party has been unable to follow rules it doesn't like. What I think is interesting about the Republican Party is that they will follow the

rules. It just turned out the rules created a minoritarian path to power and a minority path to obstruction.

I think you get the political parties and the political system that your rules will deliver. If you can block everything as a minority party, you will. If you can't, then maybe you accept a compromise to get things done because having your hands on a bill is better than being useless and out of power. If you can't win with 46 percent of the two-party vote, as the Republican Party did in 2016, then maybe you'll pick standard-bearers who might win 51 percent of the vote. I think we've lost this idea that you want to create rules that are going to give you the kind of political competition that you want.

My one piece of optimism about the Republican Party is that I think if they had to compete for votes, they would. It's just that the rules don't make them compete for votes, so they don't.

### **Stacey Abrams**

This notion of the filibuster, to your point, is a romanticized idea that this is what gives the Senate nobility. No, it gives the Senate deniability. They get to pretend that they couldn't come to a decision because they couldn't get to 60 out of 100.

We haven't always had 100 senators. We also have not always had the filibuster. And what we do need is begin to restore the building blocks of our democracy. We've got to make sure that certain Americans can vote. Which is why, in my mind and in the mind of President Obama, if you have to destroy a made-up rule to save the basic notion of who we are as a nation — a republic that elects its leadership and a democracy that determines how that leadership takes shape — it is worth doing.

### **Why democracy and economic equality are inextricably linked**

#### **Ezra Klein**

We've been talking so far about the political aspect of democracy — the access to the political system itself. But I want to, in the time we have left, talk about a couple of the other components, one of which is the economic dimension.

We live in a time of extreme income and wealth inequality. We also live in a time when a lot of people have very, very little. They don't have a job. They don't have Medicaid in many states that have not expanded the Affordable Care Act. And there are ideas of democracy that go well beyond the political aspects — that argue that there's a certain amount of sufficiency needed and equality needed in order for there to be a better level of democratic equality in relations between people.

I'm curious how you think about that economic dimension of it and what it does or doesn't demand of us.

### **Stacey Abrams**

That is what animates me as much as anything else. When I did not become governor, I had some time. I created **Fair Fight** to focus on protecting access to democracy and protecting the

franchise itself. I created **Fair Count** because the US Census is the least understood and most powerful instrument of strategy, planning, and investment in this nation. And I created the **Southern Economic Advancement Project** because the reason we need the right to vote and the reason we need a fair and accurate census is that the policies that govern our daily lives, particularly those economic policies, determine the quality of life that we get to live.

I believe in democracy because I think it is the best system available for governments. I believe in voting not because of its mystic power as an act but because voting is how we get to the things we need.

For me, the pragmatism of a fair and active and abled democracy is that it is the only way we can tackle these intractable issues: income inequality, wealth inequality, lack of access to health care, an education system that is entirely predicated on your zip code and your race — these challenges cannot be met if we do not have an active and engaged democracy that includes the voices and the lives of those who suffer most when we do not make the best choices.

So, yes, the economic dimension to me is the motivating factor. I grew up working poor in Mississippi and in many ways my parents were able to either abrogate the effects of poverty or work around it. But people aren't born into the world with my parents. And so my obligation, my commitment, my drive is grounded in this idea that our economic well-being is entirely premised on our access to democracy.

### **Ezra Klein**

You tell a story in your book about a Republican colleague of yours who pulls you aside during a debate over spending on education and says, “Well, look, you didn't have any of this and you turned out fine.” Could tell that story? I think it speaks a lot to the dueling ideologies around this particular question.

### **Stacy Abrams**

Yes. He was from wealth and he represented two counties: one that was a very wealthy white county and the other that was a poor and a majority county of color. And in this debate about investment in education, he was just befuddled by why I would argue for pouring more resources into communities that, in his mind, had simply refused to educate themselves.

He said to me, “Well you, Stacey — you turned out fine. Why would we need to do this?” And my answer to him was, “Not everyone is born with my parents.” My parents figured out the cartography of Gulfport, Mississippi, to get us zoned into the best deal possible while we still lived on the poorest street imaginable in that side of town. And that was before GPS.

Families should not have to do the type of navigation, manipulation and prayer that my parents had to do to guarantee opportunity for their children. That is antithetical to who we hold ourselves out to be as a nation. I believe that there is no guarantee of equality of success but there should be a guarantee of equality of opportunity.

If our systems are situated properly, if we are doing our work right, then we can achieve equality of opportunity and we can achieve equity of outcome that meets what people are willing and able to put into the systems.

### **Ezra Klein**

That story left me thinking about something Jared Kushner just said in **an interview on Fox and Friends**. “One thing we’ve seen in a lot of the Black community, which is mostly Democrat, is that President Trump’s policies are the policies that can help people break out of the problems that they’re complaining about. But he can’t want them to be successful more than they want to be successful.”

I think what animates some of the Republican Party’s attack on democracy itself is the idea that there are no power differentials. People just want an unfair hand up. If you don’t win the competition, it’s on you. If you can’t navigate the election system, it’s on you. And in the meantime they’re throwing up barriers to that.

### **Stacey Abrams**

I think that animating dynamic in the Republican Party is real. It is pervasive and it is unlikely to be eliminated in the single election cycle — or three. I do not believe that we elect saviors. I am hopeful that a Biden administration will approach these questions not just with empathy with but with an actual understanding of historical impediments that are not long ago history.

We have to remember when the Voting Rights Act was reauthorized in 1975, that was the first time it actually took care of Native American and Latinos who were still being subjected to literacy tests by the man who went on to become **the chief justice of the US Supreme Court**. The inability of Blacks to build wealth through housing is **directly related to federal policy**. And so there is either a misunderstanding of history or a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the connections of the laws and policies that have guided the lives of so many who have been oppressed or underinvested in for so long in this country.

### **Ezra Klein**

If Joe Biden and the Democrats win, do you think that will actually bring change in a way that people will notice in their lives?

### **Stacey Abrams**

If you read Biden’s Build Back, Better plan — if you look at what is in **the racial equity plan** — it is an incredible acknowledgment of what remains to be done and it is still not enough. That is why democracy in its fullest form is so important — because we need people who wake up and believe that they get to vote for a mayor, for a governor, for a president, but then they also get to vote for school board members who do not run on the proposition of eliminating access to their education.

When you have a robust democracy that is fully engaged and that is fully accessible to those who are eligible, what you then see are actual changes in the outcomes of lives. In part because,

again, there are more of us than there have been before. The demographic inflection point isn't simply a change in who votes for Democrat or Republican. It's a change in who can participate and force those changes to be permanent. I think that is the most terrifying part of this evolution for Republicans. It was one thing to try to block communities from participation — and it was quite convenient that certain communities exempted or simply didn't participate because of past history. That was not actually their direct fault in 2020, but they've enjoyed it.

But the reality is, whether it is a Democrat or Republican or a federalist who imposes voter suppression, if we as a nation can finally break those barriers and create opportunity for participation, I believe that we can make the changes we need. It will not happen in a single Biden administration. It will not happen in a decade. But we can lay the foundations and we can make aggressive progress because the most important part of the demographic changes we are seeing is that they're not going to stop.