

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**STACEY
ABRAMS**

**OUR TIME
IS NOW**

Introduction

Who Is Stealing America's Future?

In January 2019, my grandmother passed away. Wilter Abrams, known as Bill to family and friends, was a formidable woman. She gave birth to six children in a span of four years—two daughters and then two sets of twin boys, born in 1946, 1948, 1949, and 1950. She and my grandfather, Walter Abrams or Jim, raised five of their kids into adulthood in the crippling poverty of Mississippi and segregation, losing my father's twin brother in his infancy. Neither of my grandparents had unexpressed opinions, and they brought their children up to also hold strong convictions. Both of my grandparents were cooks at the local state university, serving students at a school their own children could not attend.

My grandfather, a slender bantam of a man, served in World War II as a navy cook and fought as a boxer during his tour. When he got drafted into the Korean War, he did his duty again, knowing the entire time that he was returning to the segregation and racial venom of the Deep South. Bitterness fought with practicality as

he returned twice to a country that denied him basic civil rights. In 2011, in the weeks before he passed, I left the special legislative session where we were drawing new political districts. I shared my frustration about the ways black and brown voters were being stripped of power. A man of colorful language, he basically warned me not to let the bastards get me down.

Just before the 2018 election, I traveled to my parents' home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The detour from the campaign trail was unusual, but both a fundraising opportunity and a deep call to see my family brought me there. One evening, I went to the master bedroom my parents had ceded to my grandmother when she could no longer live alone. She sat in her favorite recliner, watching the news on MSNBC, cell phone in her lap. I perched on the edge of her bed. Grandma turned down the volume and she asked about my election. By then, national attention had been fixed on the voter suppression allegations against Brian Kemp and on the tight numbers in our contest. I explained the latest developments to her and vented about the worries I had carried from Georgia.

When I finished, she patted my hand. Then she told me about the first time she'd ever voted. Like my grandfather, she had been incensed at the strictures of Jim Crow since childhood. Smart and quick, she had seen lesser minds advance because of racial discrimination. But she understood how the systems worked, and when her children became agitators in the civil rights movement, she warily supported their activism. Both she and my grandfather had been quieter in the movement because they understood the consequences if they got caught. Putting food on the table and keeping their house kept both of them primarily on the sidelines. But Grandma had faced the menacing growls of the massive dogs used to control protesting crowds, and she had been violently

sprayed by the water hoses used to remind blacks of their place. She'd gathered up the bail money to free her teenage son from jail when he got arrested registering voters. At one point, the local police were calling her regularly to interrogate her about the protest actions of her children. By the time the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, she understood its significance. But she also knew not to expect immediate change, and she was right. Across much of the South, the implementation came very slowly; thus her first real opportunity to vote didn't arrive until 1968.

That night, I listened to her talk and, suddenly, her voice grew tremulous. I worried that I had worn her out. But I quickly realized that the soft trembling came not from exhaustion but from shame. Quietly, she recounted the day of the election, how Granddaddy, his brother L.P., and others got ready to go and cast their first ballots in Mississippi. My dad would still be two years too young to vote, but she had the opportunity. Yet, she told me, she refused to leave her bedroom, where she sat paralyzed by fear. The laws had changed, but they had changed before.

There was the promise of an emancipation that still left her great-grandparents enslaved, and the school desegregation that took nearly a decade to arrive. But the right to vote carried the most significant victory—and she did not believe this promise was real. She explained how my grandfather called for her to meet them at the front door, but she wouldn't budge. Finally, he stormed down the hall and into the shadowed room. Impatiently, he demanded to know what was taking her so long, when history awaited their arrival.

Grandma squeezed my hand as she remembered the explanation she gave to her husband: "I'm afraid, Jim. I'm afraid of the dogs and the police. I don't want to vote." She covered my hand, and her eyes held mine. "Stacey, your grandfather got so angry.

He reminded me about your daddy and your aunts and uncles. All those young black children who fought so hard to get these rights. And there I was, afraid to use them. I was ashamed of myself." Instead of covering in the bedroom, fearing the worst, she followed the example of her children, the call of her conscience. She screwed up her courage, gathered her purse and coat, and told my grandfather she was ready to go. Together, they traveled to the precinct to cast their very first ballots. By her side, she clutched my hand again, the paper-thin skin stretched tight. She leaned in to me and rasped, "I'm so proud of you, Stacey. I know I can't vote for you, but I'm so very proud that my granddaughter is on the ballot and our people can be heard."

When I tell this story, it's not because of my grandmother's pride in my campaign, although that means a lot to me. I use this story as a warning of the fear that even the most stalwart can feel about their exercising the power of the vote. A woman who had braved economic hardship and rabid racism recoiled not at the theft of power but the possibility of taking it. That perversion of democracy continues to play out across our country every day. Voter suppression works its might by first tripping and causing to stumble the unwanted voter, then by convincing those who see the obstacle course to forfeit the race without even starting to run.

A few months ago, my youngest sister, Jeanine, met some friends at a local restaurant for margaritas at the end of a long workweek. One of the women sitting around her table made a point of telling Jeanine that she had voted for me for governor. Jeanine started to thank her for the support, but the young woman wasn't done. She then told my sister she had no intention of voting again. Recounting stories she'd heard about voters who had been sent to the wrong polling place or suddenly had

their registration vanish, she said the entire process seemed too suspicious and, in the end, her vote didn't matter. She told Jeanine she saw malicious intent in the treatment of folks who couldn't afford gas for a second round-trip to the polls or had no available time off to fix problems. Disillusionment hit her that much harder because she'd believed that the outcome could be different if she tried.

Across America, would-be voters continue to turn away like my grandmother did, or opt out of the system like my sister's friend. Their fear is again and again made real by stories of neighbors denied provisional ballots or lines that wind around city blocks because voting machines lack electrical cords. By undermining confidence in the system, modern-day suppression has swapped rabid dogs and cops with billy clubs for restrictive voter ID and tangled rules for participation. And those who are most vulnerable to suppression become the most susceptible to passing on that reluctance to others.

THE MECHANISMS OF voter suppression have transformed access to democracy in ways that continue to reshape not only our partisan politics but the way we live our daily lives. In 2020, a poor woman in South Georgia, miles away from a doctor or a hospital, may discover her pregnancy too late to make a choice. If she makes more than \$6,000 per year, she is too rich to qualify for Medicaid and too impoverished to afford anything else because the governor refuses to expand the program.¹ If she is black in Georgia, she is three times more likely to die of complications during or after her pregnancy than a white woman in the same position.² Her child is more likely to attend underfunded schools, face a return to "tough on crime" policies that target black and

brown people, and live in a state with a minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. All because her vote didn't count in 2018.

In 2018, I ran for governor of Georgia, with the goal of building a new coalition of voters to change the electorate. In response, Donald Trump tweeted nasty words at me. Tucker Carlson ranted about me. Breitbart and Fox News called me a liar. My cardinal sin is that I have refused to concede the outcome of the 2018 gubernatorial contest, and I have made a crusade of calling out and defeating voter suppression. I do so as a private citizen, and this reality greets me every day. As I have traveled the country in the months since the election, I typically begin my speeches the same way. "I am not the governor of Georgia," I tell the assembled crowds, to boos and hisses of support. Then I declare with equal conviction a truth I hold deep in my heart: "We won."

In our campaign, we increased turnout to record numbers, engaged voters who never wanted to before, and forced the closest election in Georgia since 1966. As I traveled the state for eighteen months, running for governor, I met skeptical Americans who neither trusted government nor believed their votes counted. But 1.9 million voters showed up for me on Election Day, the highest number of Democratic votes in Georgia history. We won because people trusted, if only for a single election, that it was worth a leap of faith. In political circles, what we accomplished would be dismissed as a moral victory. To that, I say, absolutely. Because I learned long ago that winning doesn't always mean you get the prize. Sometimes you get progress, and that counts. This lesson has been drummed into me for most of my waking life. When it comes to voting in America, I certainly believe.

Civil rights icon Congressman John Lewis often refers to

the right to vote as "almost sacred." As the child of ministers, I understand his hesitation to label a simple, secular act as sacred. Voting is an act of faith. It is profound. In a democracy, it is the ultimate power. Through the vote, the poor can access financial means, the infirm can find health care supports, and the burdened and heavy-laden can receive a measure of relief from a social safety net that serves all. And we are willing to go to war to defend the sacred.

I am not calling for violent revolt here. We've done that twice in our nation's history—to claim our freedom from tyranny and when we fought a civil war to recognize (at least a little) the humanity of blacks held in bondage. Yet, as millions are stripped of their rights, we live out the policy consequences, from lethal pollution running through poor communities to kindergartners practicing active shooter drills taught with nursery rhymes. I question what remedy remains. The questions that confront me every day are how to defend this sacred right and our democracy, and who will do so. As it stands now, on one side, we have a Republican Party in power that believes that it has complied with the letter of the law, having twisted the rules to barely reflect its spirit. On the other hand, the Democrats—the party to which I hold allegiance—talk about full civic engagement but take inconsistent steps to meaningfully expand the electorate and build infrastructure. Embedded in this duality is a fundamental concern: Who is entitled to full citizenship? Based on our national story, and from where we stand now, the list is far shorter than it should be.

Full citizenship rights are the bare minimum one should expect from the government. Yet, for two-thirds of our history, full citizenship was denied to those who built this country from theory

to life. African slaves and Chinese workers and Native American environmentalists and Latino gauchos and Irish farmers—and half the population: women.

Over the course of our history, these men and women, these patriots and defenders of liberty, have been denied the most profound currency of citizenship: power. Because, let's be honest, that is the core of this fight. The right to be seen, the right to be heard, the right to direct the course of history are markers of power. In the United States, democracy makes politics one of the key levers to exercising power. So, it should shock none of us that the struggle for dominion over our nation's future and who will participate is simply a battle for American power.

Right now, we are experiencing a massive cultural change, spurred by a demographic transition sweeping the nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people of color comprise nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population; and millennials and Gen Z are the largest combined age cohort in the country. When added to socially moderate and progressive-leaning whites, this population is a New American Majority, and their impact on American life can be felt in nearly every corner. Diversity, which we can admit is an incomplete descriptor of this transformation, has altered how we engage and interact, from the Black Lives Matter movement to marriage equality to Dreamers pressing for action on immigration to women challenging the silence of sexual harassment and assault.

We can also trace a darker, angrier politics to this evolution, including a resurgence of neo-Nazi rhetoric in the open, domestic terrorism against black, Jewish, Latino, and LGBTQ+ groups, a xenophobic response to immigration, rising religious intolerance, and a retrenchment of hyperconservative ideology. Those who see their relative influence shrinking are using every

tool possible to limit access to political power. For those who cling to the days of monochromatic American identity, the sweep of change strikes a fundamental fear of not being a part of an America that is multicultural and multicolored. In their minds, the way of life that has sustained them faces an existential crisis, and the response has been vicious, calculated, and effective.

However, they are not using new tools. At its inception, our nation served as a refuge to those whose difference placed them in danger; but the same newcomers stole land from and murdered the original inhabitants, enslaved blacks and stripped them of their humanity, and denied basic rights to women and nonwhites from abroad. This history means we understand what is at stake, how our opponents will try to block change, and, most important, our obligation to realize our destiny. At its core, America's challenge is a question of who we are. Some on the right will dismiss this as absurd identity politics, but identity is politics. I will make a case for that fact here. Choices are based on personal needs—end of story. Yet so much of today's politics require mollifying people terrified of this basic fact. A multiracial, multiethnic, youth-driven majority has grown over the last twenty years; and as a result, we've seen nothing less than a sea change toward progress.

There's a famous psychology test of situational awareness, where the subject is told to count how many times a certain action is performed. The viewer instinctively focuses on the task so intently, he invariably misses a glaring oddity: a person in a gorilla suit crossing through his field of vision. As Americans, we have become accustomed to a fundamental belief in the inevitability that we'll get it right in time: that from bigotry to poverty to the planet's very sustainability, eventually, we will make the right choice. This confidence in the American experiment has welded

together a disparate group of folks, driven by conflicting desires and intersectional needs. But our belief in the resilience of our national narrative has been so complete that we've missed the Invisible Gorilla in our existing political system: those at risk of losing power—that powerful minority—have changed the rules of the game. Again.

As the first black woman ever to win a primary for governor for a major political party in American history, one who ran against one of the worst purveyors of voter suppression and xenophobia since George Wallace, I watched in real time as the conflicts in our evolving nation became fodder for racist commercials, horrific suppression—and the largest turnout of voters of color in Georgia's history. Because, despite the final tally of the election, our campaign energized this New American Majority in tremendous ways, proving the resilience and possibility of our national destiny. What excites me about this book is not the litany of challenges to our body politic—although they must be explored and exposed—but the potential I saw in the tired eyes of an African American shift worker waiting in a four-hour line to cast a ballot of hope.

This is not a behind-the-scenes campaign book but a narrative that describes the urgency that compels me and millions more to push for a different American story than the one being told today. It's a story that is one part danger, one part action, and all true. It's a story about how and why we fight for our democracy and win. Using stories from my own life, those of others I've met as I've traveled through Georgia's rural towns and cities, interviews with candidates on the same path I am on, as well as political insights I've gained along the way, this book will be a primer on how we can guarantee our right to choose the vision we want for our country—and how we make it so.

REAL ACCESS TO THE RIGHT TO VOTE ISN'T A GUARANTEE—AND THAT'S A PROBLEM

Most of us can recite the preamble to the Constitution (or sing it if we learned the words from *Schoolhouse Rock!*). The promises of justice and liberty come with the responsibility for electing leaders to protect and make them real. Yet, from limiting original voting rights to white men, to the elitist and racist origins of the Electoral College, American democracy has always left people out of participation, by design. Any lasting solutions come solely from the U.S. Constitution, the highest legal bar imaginable; and over the centuries, we clawed out access to the ballot for people of color through the Fifteenth Amendment, women in the Nineteenth Amendment, and young voters in the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. But each of those amendments contained a loophole for suppression: leaving implementation to the states, particularly the ones most hostile to inclusion. Add to that the generational underfunding of the basic mechanics of elections, where incompetence and malfeasance operate in tandem, and the sheer complexity of the national voting apparatus smooths suppression into a nearly seamless operation.

Since 2008's election of the first black president, we have achieved extraordinary victories. Millions of Americans, too used to seeing themselves only on the margins or not at all, have participated in historic and hopeful wins in the House and hard-fought victories for the U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races. However, across the country, we witnessed a "power grab" from the minority desperate to hold on to power. The examples of this abound: Native Americans living on reservations in North Dakota were told that in order to vote, they had to have street addresses—where none existed. In Mississippi, impoverished elderly folks

who needed an absentee ballot had to pay for a notary public to submit the ballot—resulting in a new-fashioned poll tax. In Georgia, tens of thousands of people of color had their applications for registration held up because of typographical errors in government databases and a failed system called “exact match.” Of the 53,000 applications blocked by this process, 80 percent were from people of color.

Voter suppression—from getting on the rolls to being allowed to vote to having those votes count—is real. But Americans need a robust understanding of what suppression looks like today. Today, the ones barring access have shifted from using billy clubs and hoses to using convoluted rules to make it harder to register and stay on the rolls, cast a ballot, or have that ballot counted. To move forward, we must understand the extent to which the shrinking conservative minority will go to create barriers to democracy. Citing voting rights experts and my own work in expansion of voting access for the past twenty-five years, here I will not only explain the problem but offer concrete solutions to fix it.

WHO WE ARE MATTERS: IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE CENSUS

The United States has always fumbled in its pursuit of social equality, but we face a new round of concerns that are particularly damning. Whether it's the stories of police brutality against blacks or the invisibility of the disabled community, who we say we are as a country is not currently held up by how our systems behave. For the New American Majority—that coalition of people of color, young people, and moderate to progressive whites—to be successful, we have to stop letting them tell us who we are and

how to succeed. That begins when we reject the false choice of “identity” versus “universality.”

We are strongest when we see the most vulnerable in our society, bear witness to their struggles, and then work to create systems to make it better. Whether it's the civil rights acts of the early '60s or the advance of women's rights or marriage equality, we are a better country when we defend the weakest among us and then empower them to choose their own futures. In these pages, I will dissect how identity has been weaponized against the very communities that need its power. Through stories of how identity politics have shaped and changed the fabric of our nation, and with ideas for how we can reclaim the power of identity via the U.S. census, this book will detail a path forward where identity is celebrated, not feared.

Voting by identity works. Just look at how the right's power has been apportioned. Now, it's time for the New American Majority to leverage the same tools to achieve the goals of expanded access to opportunity. In theory, this should work too. Our numbers are bigger. Our successes, from the New Deal to the Affordable Care Act, are more durable. Our coalition is energized. We have the ability to permanently affect policies and shape the delivery of justice, but we have to pay attention to what's been accomplished under our noses and own the identities that made it possible.

DEFEATING POPULISM AND WINNING ELECTIONS TO SAVE DEMOCRACY

My experience in 2018 was pretty straightforward. I ran for office, dogged by a racist demagogue who carefully disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of Georgians and who controlled

the levers of the election. I watched him be rewarded for joining a growing pool of political leaders who revel in a pervasive, systemic process of stripping the right to vote from some and building obstacles to access for others.

But the threat is also coming from inside the coalition itself: citizens grappling with racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty are the *least* likely to vote. They have come to expect suppression from the opposition and inaction from the winners. Worse, the candidates who should engage them are afraid to reach out. We need active and relentless participation in our elections and government. Unfortunately, candidates and their consultants tend to view these groups as the hardest and most expensive to reach, so campaigns typically decide to hunt elsewhere for votes. Or political leaders fear that visible engagement with these marginalized groups will cost them votes from white traditional voters, and they deliberately ignore their communities.

True progress can only happen if we knit together the “who” of identity with the “how” of voting into effective, inclusive campaigns and movements. We must dispel myths that give primacy to the archetype of a working-class white man in Ohio who voted for Reagan in 1980, and instead expand our polity to recognize that his daughter might be married to a Kenyan woman who is waiting for permanent residence and their first child in Arkansas. The blue wave election of 2018, which included victories and close losses in unexpectedly competitive territories, demonstrates that demographic changes have come to fruition and are ready to become a political road map to sustained progress. But to do so, we must understand the hard work of civic engagement. We can’t wait for election time to come around.

Candidates and the campaigns they run matter now more than ever. I ran a campaign different from anything that preceded it

and, by doing so, proved that what happened with Obama was not a fluke but a foreshadowing of how we can win even more. In our campaign, and in campaigns around the country, new people were able to step forward and win—and they did so by recognizing the intersection of identity and voting rights.

Beyond Congress, there are the unmentioned corridors of power we too often cede: state and local elections, from school boards and county commissions to boards of elections and secretaries of state. These elections matter because the architecture of our rights begins closest to home. The attention to national politics makes sense for those who have been denied access. States’ rights—the idea that each state should be allowed to set its own rules—controls much of how life is lived in America. The practical reality is that where you live determines your ability to marry, buy a house, get an abortion, or start a business, and creating equality in these areas has usually required federal action to guarantee basic rights. Thus, by recognizing and harnessing the power of nonfederal offices, those who long for a more homogenous, segregated bygone era have grown stronger and more resilient.

The Trump administration has amplified weaknesses in our democracy, but he and his enablers in Congress and the judiciary have shone a spotlight on the dangers of populism here and abroad. Americans must understand the compelling nihilism of authoritarian populism to avoid a permanent breakdown in democracy. Across the globe, former democracies are slipping into autocracy, and the United States is not immune. To restore our country, we have to deconstruct what got us here and how to repair our nation before it’s too late.

Whether it’s the looming 2020 election or the first congressional election post-redistricting in 2022, or a post-Trump era, we must do the same long-term planning of those who work to

deny us agency. Our obligation is to fortify democracy's infrastructure and to train those who have been isolated from power to use this formidable weapon of demographic supremacy. Demography is not destiny; it is opportunity. We have internalized the worst lessons of our opponents and hamstringed our own progress by catering to the backbiting, loathing, and timidity of fear. At its core, I hope this book will be a manual of action where readers know how to protect the right to vote, champion the diversity of who we are today, and demand political leadership that does both from now on.

I have two siblings who missed out on most of my campaign for governor: a brother who watched my race from a television in a state prison and a sister who is forbidden to engage in partisan politics as a federal judge. My vision for America isn't one where Leslie is the star and Walter is simply a cautionary tale. My America sees my brother and my sister as the promise of what our nation can and must become—a place of extraordinary success that transcends barriers and a place of redemption that defies the cynicism of our politics. This is a vision that only comes into being when everyone has a true voice in our futures. America, for all its faults, has always been a place of promise and renewal, of mistakes made and the constant pursuit of atonement. This is a new manifesto for our progressive future, one emboldened by understanding that our time of waiting is over. The fight for our future has already begun.

And guess what? We won.

CHAPTER 1

Everything Old Is New Again

On November 15, 2018, I sat frozen on my living-room sofa, the earbuds to my phone still dangling from my ears, but I heard nothing. I'd just hung up from a call with my campaign manager, Lauren Groh-Wargo, and I was numb. The final numbers from the court-mandated count of recovered absentee and provisional ballots had finally come in. In order to force a runoff, we needed nearly 17,000 more votes, but they had not materialized. This call was like several I'd received in the nine-day interim between Election Day and that evening, but bitter in its finality. Four lawsuits had been filed, and the chance for victory hung in the balance for every decision. But now the numbers had been tallied.

We'd run an extraordinary campaign that proved our theory that increasingly diverse Georgia had become a Democratic-leaning state. *Early investments in infrequent voters?* Check. *Consistent, authentic progressive messaging?* Check. *Outreach in multiple languages?* Check. *Centering the issues of communities of color and*

Victory must begin to mean more than winning a single election. Our obligation, in Georgia and across the nation, is to seize the high road by changing how we campaign and to whom. Demography is not destiny; it's opportunity. We have to expand our vision of who belongs in the big tent of progress, invest in their inclusion, and talk to them about what's at stake. This formula is no guarantee of triumph—but I can promise that without it, we don't stand a chance of conquering the future.

CHAPTER 9

Populism and the Death of Democracy

I met Will Dobson in Liberty, Missouri, in 1994 at the annual welcoming week for the newest class of Harry S. Truman Scholars. Will and I had been picked from our respective colleges and states; the following summer, we were invited to D.C. as part of their policy institute. We interned for different departments in the federal government as a precursor to graduate school. One day, Will invited me out to lunch, and our conversation turned to the primacy of foreign policy over domestic policy. I pushed the domestic policy side; the argument that we had to solve our problems first before venturing abroad. I had taken international studies courses as part of my degree at Spelman College, but I was headed off to grad school to steep myself in domestic public affairs. But what he challenged me with was, "Look, if you want to be a leader, you have to understand more than your space." And he said, "You do that in every other part of your academic life and your intellectual life; why are you closing yourself off on

the foreign policy side?" I couldn't effectively rebut him, which was really annoying—so I started learning.

In college and in grad school, I kept up my focus on civic engagement in the United States, and, due to Will's influence, I started studying social policy in Brazil, of all places. Through him, I learned about the Salzburg Global Seminar, and I applied to become an international fellow on civic engagement, investigating how increasing youth participation affected political regimes. All the fellows lived together in a schloss in Austria. My two closest companions were my roommate, Claudia, from Colombia, and Tejan from Sierra Leone.¹ Claudia studied in Bogotá, and she led protests against government corruption. Sitting in our room one night, she told me about death threats she'd received for her organizing work and that she might be arrested when she came back from Austria. Frightened for her, I marveled as she dismissed the danger she faced. She believed in the democracy promised by her nation's constitution, and it was her duty to show her fellow students their capacity for leadership.

A former child soldier, Tejan had escaped from his captors and found his way to his decimated village. After years of civil war, he had come to Austria to learn how to translate his trauma into democratic reforms. Like Claudia, he faced police surveillance and death threats, but he knew his work affected the future of his younger siblings and fellow emancipated fighters. In their company, I worried about whether my work in Georgia really meant anything. I centered my efforts around eradicating youth poverty through civic engagement, not the persistent violent crises they lived with daily. Midway through our time together, we huddled over a table in the common room after dinner. With a twinge of embarrassment, Tejan confessed to me that he had not expected to see a black American at the event, and Claudia

quickly agreed. They could recite the ignominies of Jim Crow and black sufferings under '80s economic and social policy. Much of their efforts was informed by the civil rights movement, and they delighted in peppering me with questions. I did the same, and to this day, I draw on their lessons of how universal and difficult it is to get those most harmed by public policy to take ownership.

From there, I participated in an East Asian studies program to examine how their economies and political structures shaped the future of globalization. Hooked, I worked with the British-American Project, the Council of Italy, the American Council of Young Political Leaders program, and the Council on Foreign Relations, among others. In 2004, I traveled to Bulgaria as part of the German Marshall Fund's program. I sat in a small office in Sofia, meeting with representatives of the Roma people. I listened keenly as they described the arc of their community's history, marginalized and isolated from power. Nearly a decade later, I had a similar discussion with an Aboriginal leader who pressed me for details about the cause of civil rights in America. Whether I was meeting with executives in Seoul, Korea, or entrepreneurs in Tel Aviv, I developed relationships that leaned upon my life as an American as a point of entry to discussion. While foreign policy seemed to stray beyond my focus as a state legislative leader and a voting rights advocate, I intentionally worked to build a robust understanding of international complexities. Moreover, Will was right that any leadership in America must understand the international approach to global questions as well as the intersectionality of our policies. Plainly said, we have to understand the effect we are having on the world, and vice versa.

The 2016 election and the tumult that has followed heightens my conviction that we are obliged to reclaim our democracy

now. I no longer believe there is a bright line between domestic and foreign policy. What has played out in the last few years has shown us just how thin that line is, if the line exists at all. The New American Majority stands to inherit the consequences of authoritarian populism here, and we can shape our response to its legacy abroad. Authoritarian populism should not be confused with the type of progressivism that uses the language of economic dignity and labor to galvanize political change.² Its American progenitor, William Jennings Bryan, helped shape the modern Democratic Party with his calls for more inclusive politics that centered the needs of the economically vulnerable. However, populism, like most theories, can have different strains. In modern politics, progressive populists have argued a more inclusive message than the fearmongering of the Know-Nothings. Think Huey Long, Jesse Jackson, Sherrod Brown, or Bernie Sanders. While some characteristics cut across populism, the dangerous kind seeks to dismantle and destroy rather than advance and uplift. My deep concern lies with the current expression of destructive populism in America and abroad—the type that seeks authoritarianism as its end.

The rise of populism is a direct threat to our political, social, and cultural fates, whether it occurs in the White House or in Poland. Populism challenges and pushes into relief the tensions that exist in a democracy; taken to extremes, it tends to presage a slide into flawed democracy and then into authoritarianism. Despite our sanguine belief in the permanence of the U.S. system of governance, according to the annual Democracy Index, we have fallen to number 25 on the list of functional democracies, below Canada, Mauritius, and Uruguay, to name a few. The international scale rates us as a flawed democracy in the twenty-first century, a terrible slide from our preeminence as a world

leader. And less than twenty years ago, Turkey had a thriving democracy that now struggles to hold on to the claim.

My deepest fear is that it will take too long to restore our position in the world because our moral credibility has been diminished. It is difficult to articulate ideals of who we should be and who we expect the world to be when we are not living those ideals at home. When the president authorizes family separation of immigrants or tramples minority rights based on religious beliefs, when his handpicked judiciary shrugs off the corruption of self-dealing or hiding witnesses, American leaders cannot then go abroad and espouse a different set of ideals. The hypocrisy of barring transgender people from our military undermines our arguments against countries like Azerbaijan that seek to criminalize the LGBTQ+ community. It is a matter of degree, not of difference. We have failed to recognize the suppression of minority rights. We continue to have a Muslim ban on entry, and we have also undervalued and mistreated voters right here at home. Like Modi's India, we have allowed the blossoming of laws that have systematically suppressed minority rights and minority votes in the United States.

By succumbing to the lure of populism made real by a combination of the Electoral College and voter suppression, we now have the most reckless foreign policy that we've had in modern history. I may have disagreed with George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush and Clinton and Obama on things, but I never disagreed fundamentally with the position the United States held in the international order. I do now. The persistence of Trump's style of populism has an effect on how safe we are as Americans, both physically and economically. For example, during most of 2018 and 2019, the U.S. president launched the largest trade war in a generation. Though played out through goods and services rather than

bullets, a trade war has a real effect on everyday lives. The U.S. consumer bears the majority of the costs passed along to businesses and hidden in the prices we pay. Economically struggling Americans feel the results in daily life, especially those who face stagnant wages that have not grown despite having the lowest unemployment we've ever had. The average American cannot recover from a trade war with the same resilience that a corporation can. The only solution will be to actually engage in trade policy that is not based on populist brinksmanship, which is what we've seen play out for the last few years. As Trump positions China front and center, our country is also embroiled in trade battles with historic allies such as Germany, Britain, France, and Canada.

As with trade, our immigration position has weakened our stature abroad, at a time when international civil wars and climate refugees begin a new wave of transmigration. Authoritarian populism grounded in alienation of outsiders eviscerates our ability to call for international cooperation when the crisis peaks. America will have to restore the humanity of our refugee policy. Demographic changes like slowing birth rates, automation, and shifts in industry anchors mean we also have to anticipate a changed labor market. With harsh, divisive rhetoric that casts immigrants as the enemy, we undermine our national security by weakening our economic security. Our only solution will be, again, to finally have a robust and real policy for immigration that recognizes America's deep reliance on foreign labor and our history as a nation of immigrants. That is our responsibility. But we must have a Congress and a president who are willing to actually confront these issues and cease worrying about the next election and actually worry about the next twenty years of American life.

Once he leaves office—regardless of when—the actions carried out under Trump's banner of "America First" will affect any

international interventions we attempt. Thus, we have to recognize that the iteration of populist-driven policy is not going to simply be tied off with a new leader. We are going to have to rebuild and restore our credibility, and that means that we're going to have to confront the very real harm that's been done to our foreign policy by our current administration. America's role as a model of democratic norms, moral leadership, and global problem-solving are required now more than ever. The presidency under Donald Trump will not necessarily revert to type with his ouster. His command of the authoritarian populist playbook is strong, but he has not yet fully completed the process. His successors might. Which is why we must reaffirm why America must aggressively defend its role in the world.

TAKING POWER FROM THE PEOPLE

The ringing of the phone startled me from sleep. And though the call came around 8:00 a.m., I had not yet roused myself from bed because I'd had a long week. The legislative session was in full swing, and I spent my weekends visiting traumatized Democrats around the state.

It was the start of 2017, the beginning of the Trump administration, and the anti-immigrant fervor of the newly inaugurated president had swept into Georgia. A GOP state representative had proposed HB 66, a piece of legislation that would tax wire transfers to other countries. Or, more precisely, it would tax remittances that the undocumented sent home to their families. The punitive taxing scheme could generate an estimated \$100 million each year.³

I'd already warned the immigrant-rights groups and small businesses affected by the proposal, some who processed the wire

transfers and others who used them. But on Sunday, January 29, 2017, the phone call raised a new alarm. A civil rights activist needed me to mobilize attorneys to gather at the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. Trump's Muslim ban had taken effect against immigrants, refugees, and people from six Muslim nations; and at the world's busiest airport, families were being harangued and turned back from the homes they knew. I quickly coordinated with leaders at the ACLU, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and others who needed lawyers to help field the panicked appeals for assistance. The counter-response to Trump's edict was immediate: all day and into the night, protesters gathered at the airport and around the nation in a spontaneous rejection of this new American cruelty.

On Monday, January 30, back at the Georgia state capitol, I drafted a letter for our senior U.S. senator, Johnny Isakson. Though we came from different political camps, he and I had worked together on a number of issues over the years. I emailed the letter to my executive assistant to place on letterhead for my signature. In particular, I wanted her to see my request, as she served as the only Palestinian Muslim employed by the Georgia House of Representatives. "America is a nation grounded in its globalist capacity, rooted in a fierce memory of our founding by those who sought to flee oppression," I wrote. "My ancestors arrived through enslavement, but I hold the American history of open doors to be a profound counterpoint to our bleaker impulses. To isolate believers of the Muslim faith and to validate disparagement of their contributions to our nation is to invite the scourge of religious persecution against others around the world, led by our example." It was simply a letter, but I felt compelled to show my assistant and our senator what I saw. I don't recall if I received a response, not that one would have changed the course

of the Trump administration. Eventually, the ban—weakened but still pointed at the Islamic faith—gained approval from the U.S. Supreme Court.

Fast-forward to Sunday, January 12, 2020, three years later. That morning, my phone pinged with a text message at 9:59 a.m. The sender, an immigrant rights leader, wrote, "Sorry to bother u on Sunday morning but we have an Iranian student detained at the airport. She goes to [a Georgia university] on a student visa. She's going to be deported today." Again, I quickly acknowledged the message and began calling Democrats in Georgia's congressional delegation, and they agreed to help. Before they could intervene, though, the young woman was deported back to Iran, away from her studies and her friends. In Boston, in New York, across the country, similar deportations sent students, doctors, and others away from the lives they'd built here. All on the orders of an American president in the twenty-first century.

In the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, no one can turn on the television or open a newspaper without confronting a sharp panic about the ideological divide in the Democratic Party and how it might play into the outcome of the contest. Think pieces abound about the cleaving of the Big Tent party, where all are welcome, into rabid factions that will tear each other apart in the run-up to the election. According to the breathless analyses, the Left and the Farther Left share a deep disdain for the Center Left while despising one another. Medicare for All or Medicare for All Who Want It confront Obamacare for Now as though the latter signals the presence of moral infirmity. A commitment to climate change proves insufficient if the timeline for action strays by a year or so, or worse, if the hierarchy of the cause isn't ticked high enough on the list. Even I am not immune to it all, despite the fact that I am not running for anything. On Twitter

and Facebook and screeds in some left-leaning publications, I am denounced as a corporatist and a faux progressive. The angst spills out into daily conversations I have with voters, which are underpinned with a sense of depression that worries it is already too late.

Winning in 2020 and beyond depends on candidates who recognize that they are not running against Donald Trump or the darker impulses he represents; they are running *for* America. And there is a difference. If a campaign is waged solely against the current occupant of the White House, then his behavior becomes the fulcrum against which decisions are made—pettiness to match pettiness; incivility for incivility.

On the other hand, a candidate intent on winning over Americans leads with the kinds of conversations we need to have about contentious domestic policy issues and complex foreign policy. That candidate rejects the well-worn tradition of fearmongering and demonization as a way of swaying voters to their cause. The Democrat who takes back the White House must refuse to cater to the underbelly of vicious populist anger in our nation. Instead, the victor will bring more people to the table because, for so many of us, fear has always been a part of how we navigate America, especially as minority communities. Fear is a given, but fear is not a reason to vote. Hope is a reason to vote: a visible, visceral compassion for those who worry for the future and fret about the now. The triumphant candidate weaves together these reasons without casting fellow citizens as villains. But in politics, as in life, there is nothing new under the sun, particularly blaming the marginalized and disadvantaged for the wrongs of life. Always, authoritarianism and the death of democracy wait in the shadow of populism.

The strains of populism that have bolstered class identity in American politics too often become entangled with racism,

misogyny, and a hatred for others that leads to sustained hostility and violence—but this is nothing new. The original populists, the Know-Nothing Party of the early 1800s, turned their cries for equity for poor whites into vitriolic attacks on minorities. Trawl social media today and the same animosity wrapped in righteousness has resurfaced. Whether fully embraced by a majority political party or not, in the United States, both parties have welcomed the sleight of hand used to engage populism's promises of relief to the underdog—often by victimizing another group instead. What has kept the threat of unchecked populism in the United States at bay is democracy itself. Democracy protects the expression of minority needs while supporting majority gains. Trump may win the presidency, but the women's marches can fill the streets of dozens of cities. The urgency of fighting the corrosive version of populism the Trump administration has heightened (but not created) in America cannot be reduced to simply defeating him in an election. Under his government, our moral standing has weakened, our rule of law has fractured, and our checks and balances have failed. But we must accept this truth. He is not a singularity, and what he represents will continue even after his defeat, so our ambition must be larger than fighting him.

THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM AS DEMOCRACY'S ENEMY

Democracies, in every region of the world, are straining. The liberal democratic order that arose from World War II and reached its pinnacle in the years after the end of the Cold War faces new threats. Authoritarian regimes seek to unwind the new world order Americans have come to take for granted. Consider the democratically elected leadership of Taiwan, which stands firm

in its freedoms under the narrow gaze of China's authoritarian empire. The people of Taiwan understand that the independence they have fought to maintain holds no guarantees. Or, take Ukraine, a former Soviet-bloc nation that broke from Russia and yet has to fight constantly to fend off Russian assaults. With their respective military and economic might, China and Russia stand as formidable external risks to these two democracies on their doorsteps.

But the greater threat is the one that has emerged from within liberal democracies across the globe: the threat of populism run amok. Beyond the United States' first brushes with the phenomenon, in Russia, the *Narodnichestvo* of the 1860s and '70s founded a similar populist movement that sought to replace the urban elites with the true power found in the farmers of the rural countryside. The 1950s and '60s birthed variations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Survey current economic unrest on nearly every continent that has experimented with democracy, and exemplars of populism abound, which should terrify Americans who believe in the system of government designed to provide a degree of equity to society.

Democracies rarely fall today because of military coups or foreign invasion. Instead, their death is gradual, coming slowly and over time with an erosion of rights and an accumulation of attacks on the institutions that form their backbone. From Hungary to India, from the Philippines to Venezuela, the corrosive power of populism wielded by authoritarians—an illiberal political current that tramples on democratic institutions while claiming to speak in the name of the people—has made deep inroads across the globe. And what is so pernicious about populism is that it arrives in disguise. While it comes to fruition through democratic electoral politics, it simultaneously has an

utter disregard for liberal institutions or norms. The authoritarian populist succeeds at the ballot box but, once in power, chips away at the very architecture of democracy.

The populist attack usually follows a standard playbook. The first step is the entrance of a charismatic leader. He—and it is almost always a “he”—offers himself as someone new and different, unbound by the rules and norms that have guided others. Whether he is gliding down a golden escalator or standing on an overturned milk crate, his language and style attract and hold attention. The delivery may be coarse, but that deviation from the polished, professional leader only adds to the appeal of making him appear like everyday people, one unafraid to speak “truths.” By defying conventions like vetting officials or holding press conferences, he seeks to have a direct and unmediated relationship with the “people.” The charismatic populist chooses a variety of tropes to launch his romancing of the crowds. Jair Bolsonaro won Brazil's presidential election by promising to exploit the Amazon rain forest and mimicking the behaviors of military dictators. The specifics of the leader's message do not matter, because it isn't about specific policies—his message is the politicization of social resentment and exploitation of people's fears. He will craft a message based on people's grievances, as President Rodrigo Duterte did in the Philippines by promising to kill thousands of drug traffickers and criminals without trials. And he will lambaste and promise miraculous results in any of the areas in which government has failed to be responsive to people's concerns (real or imagined).

Once he has the attention of his targets, the populist must polarize politics. He may wrap himself in the mantle of a particular cause, but he does not care about ideological divisions or a polarization based on political beliefs. To the populist, his

aim isn't an argument between competing political visions—the authoritarian populist was never truly motivated by ideas in the first place. Instead, to captivate and hold his audience, he casts his fight in moral terms: good versus evil, light versus dark. Embedded in his rhetoric are plaudits that give his supporters a rationale for their anger. Those who stand with him are patriots, and his opponents are enemies, traitors, or terrorists. Cast in this light, his political opponents are no longer viewed by his own supporters as champions of an alternative political vision with which they disagree. Instead, the opposition is stripped of any claims to national loyalty. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi has cemented power through not only stoking the fervor of Hindu identity; he has publicly stripped the Muslim minority of their place in India's secular state. Upon democratic reelection in 2019, Modi nullified Article 370, the agreement that had protected Muslims in the Kashmir region since 1949, shortly following the division of Pakistan and India in 1947. Months later, his parliament offered citizenship to refugees in India, except those of Muslim faith. Through tirades, bombast, or acts of the legislature, opponents to the populist's aims are transformed into menaces, enemies of the people. When the opposition speaks up, denounces the populist's pronouncements, or attempts to resist the populist's moves, their warnings only feed his narrative that he is the one true leader against the corrupt elites.

To maintain his hold, he must ratchet up the polarization of politics to a sustained fever pitch. He must take more strident and uncompromising positions, over and over again. The aim is simple: to prove his mettle and whip up his supporters, he has to challenge his opponent on the field of battle. By doing so, he makes it appear as though society is irreconcilably at odds with

itself, that there are sharp and deep rifts between his camp of true patriots and those who mean to harm it.

Take Nigel Farage, the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party who advocated for Britain to leave the European Union by declaring that those who sought a break achieved “victory for the real people.”⁴ In that declaration, he decried the 48 percent of British citizens who rejected Brexit as the enemy, not real Britons.⁵ The populist doesn't just want conflict; he requires it. The visible wrestling match depends on clashes that draw the attention and maintain the emotional connection stoked by his charisma. His chief enemy is anything approaching reason, consensus, or moderation. So, he convinces his followers to reject any logic that questions his own. He feints toward compromise to get attention, then blows up any potential for joint action. And he draws lines in the sand, only to vault over them, thereby resetting what seemed normal.

But polarization is merely one tactic, and the populist understands that he has to create permanent rifts that threaten to reassert the normal order. Thus, once the charismatic leader has effectively polarized politics and taken power, he must set to work to attack all democratic institutions and rob them of credibility. His most valuable targets are the basic building blocks of democracy: the media, the judiciary, any independent authorities that might constrain his power. Preemptively discrediting the media is a first-order imperative because he knows full well that good journalism will shine a light on his abuses. Hugo Chávez and then his successor, Nicolás Maduro, leveraged Venezuela's 2004 Law on Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media to censor media and limit coverage of demonstrations and critics of the government. By bringing suits against both

traditional media and social media, populist leaders have muted coverage of state actions, even as recently as the oil and food crisis of 2019 as thousands filled the streets. And effective populists also create new direct connections with their supporters, from weekly radio programs to reinforce the polarizing messages to aggressive Twitter feeds to stoke outrage and reshape reality.

For the authoritarian-in-training, the next target will likely be courts. In democracies, a judiciary willing to uphold the rule of law is the most potent direct constraint on his power. In response, he will politicize their work, question their agenda, and fill their ranks with cronies or sympathizers. Having silenced critiques and manipulated the law, the final act is dismantling the machinery of democracy through undermining the institutions and laws that act as guardrails against the personalistic accumulation of power. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, democratically elected first in 1998 and again in 2010, quickly moved to weaken the judiciary and install his allies in newly created institutions.

Having destroyed so many institutions, the populist must now build a new, resilient regime through patronage politics. Since he never had any true beliefs or policies, he is not circumscribed by an actual agenda. Instead, he will fill the ranks of government and any perches of political influence with cronies, patrons, or backers. This extends beyond the pinnacles of power. What policies he does design or support will reward his core supporters, however he perceives them. Turkey, for long a parliamentary democracy, established an executive presidency in 2017, rather than the more ceremonial role of president. This constitutional change allowed its former prime minister to imbue the newly charged role of president with expansive authorities. As the first Turkish president of this type, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

has the authority to dissolve the federal legislative body, appoint his cabinet, issue decrees, and essentially operate without monitors, as he also appoints the courts and the bureaucracies. For the authoritarian populist, the faster traditional monitors of democratic norms can be discarded or eroded, the better.

GETTING OUR CREDIBILITY BACK

The first steps to restoring our nation's standing are electing a new president, protecting the processes that can deliver a representative and active Congress, and removing the barriers that hinder an engaged citizenry. We must also anticipate the next populist leader's emergence, which means we must strengthen our democratic institutions, we must fortify our voting rights with permanent fixes in law and the constitution, and we have to live our values and hold leaders accountable when they fail to behave.

America today is approximately 51 percent female, 13.4 percent black, and 18.1 percent Hispanic.⁶ Under the Trump administration, however, the nation's leadership does not reflect its composition. As of 2020, of the twenty-four cabinet or cabinet-level positions, only three are held by women and three are held by people of color, and of this group, one is a woman of color. Observers blasted his all-white, all-male lineup of military leaders as he announced attacks on Iran.⁷ The foreign service corps has a similarly dismal composition: 6 percent Hispanic, 5.6 percent black, 6.8 percent Asian, 0.3 percent Native American.⁸ His judicial appointments are record-breaking. By January 2020, Trump has appointed 185 judges to the federal bench, and his confirmations include two Supreme Court justices, dozens of circuit court judges, and more than 100 district court judges. In the populism playbook, reshaping the judiciary is a key metric,

and Trump's alliance with the GOP-controlled Senate has confirmed a slate of judges that are 76 percent male and more than 85 percent white. These appointments are not at all reflective of the composition of our country. And when people are checking us for our values, they can see that our representation in the domestic and international order does not reflect who we are, which negates our ability to criticize their own discrimination.

Diversity informs and expands a nation's capacity to groom effective leaders, and history has proven that it is a helpful thing to have better and more effective leaders. Our greatest weakness in our democracy stems from our treatment of minorities, which serves as a cornerstone of democracy's utility. To reclaim our standing, we must be able to show the world that we actually value minorities, as then we have a moral leg to stand on when we tell them the participation of minorities in their body politic is important. Survey when autocracies and authoritarian regimes come into power, and their first act is to eliminate minority rights. Populists succeed by treating the other as the enemy, which makes it much easier to do the work of strongman leadership. And that's part of what we're seeing in the nation-states that are retreating from their democracies—what happened in the Philippines, what happened in Turkey, what's happening across Eastern Europe. The suppression of minority rights is the first hallmark of the end of liberal democracy and a grave danger to those communities. Therefore, there is a public benefit and an international good to minority representation in America's democratic institutions. We cannot demand that others value minority rights elsewhere when we fail to demand it of ourselves. Voting rights are essential and fundamental to democracy, and we are facing an existential crisis in the United States. Our democracy is shredded by naked pursuits of power that allow

states to suppress the right to vote, and we face a crippling challenge to our leadership here and abroad. What we have seen play out in the last twenty years has been an aggressive attempt at voter suppression that is directly targeted to communities that have long been outside the body politic, and it began when they started to enter and affect elections in real and tangible ways. Yet, the international consequence is that we are no longer credible as election supervisors and election monitors when in our own country some of our largest states are engaging in voter suppression as a native good. Political power evolves when new people come into the process. An increase in minority participation halts the advance of populism, and minority voices often lead to progress because typically they are upset that they were left out of previous transformations. In the twentieth century, blacks were excluded from the New Deal programs, the G.I. Bill as former soldiers, and housing programs due to federal prohibitions on loans and where they could buy houses. Latinos and Asian Americans faced educational discrimination at the public school level, and they also faced housing discrimination. Voter participation blunted their complaints, and as more have become civically active, greater attention has been paid to their needs. The same is true for other disadvantaged communities. Populists understand that the corollary to energizing the base of their power is the suppression of the other. Americans like to think that we're invulnerable, but we are not. Our systems are not. Our democracy may be resilient, but it is also fragile. And that fragility is what is at stake now.

When I think about the next generation of elections, my deepest fear is that we are going to face not just voter suppression but that the more insidious part of voter suppression will take effect and people will believe that they no longer count. When people

self-select out of participation, that is actually a much more effective consequence because increasing difficulty is one thing, but making participation seem irrelevant has a much more pervasive and permanent effect. In a putative democracy where the majority of the minority decides their voices no longer matter, we are in a dire circumstance. This threatens democracy for the United States and thus is a threat internationally. By restoring the Voting Rights Act and undertaking the raft of proposed voter engagement legislation presented to Congress and to the various states, we can reassert our leadership and demonstrate how to recover from the hazards of suppression.

Our institutions and our voting rights feed into the most visible example of our decency. How we treat our people is a beacon for how we intend to lead. The metrics of health, education, economic security, climate action, and national security hold long-term consequences in the international context, which means that if the ideals and the values we espouse abroad are not enshrined at home, then our ability to call for that liberal democratic order is eroded. American credibility has been threatened before. During the Cold War, the USSR very effectively used the propaganda of America's presence in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa. They told those nascent democracies emerging from colonialism, "This is a country that tells you to trust them, but they are purveyors of inequality and racism. Why believe them?" Our credibility was deeply damaged in the 1980s, having a president who supported apartheid as an acceptable political and economic system. So, it's not that our credibility hasn't been damaged before. The stark difference is how Trump and his political supporters have undertaken a sustained attempt to abrogate our systems in the ways we have seen since 2017.

Nations watch what we do, and they emulate our behavior,

even now. America's authority to question Russian president Vladimir Putin's treatment of dissidents weakened when President Trump refused to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for the murder of an American resident and journalist. International calls to accept refugees from Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere go unanswered when the Trump administration offers individual states the right to refuse resettlement. To the extent that they are emulating the behavior of America and the erosion of democracy, we have to recognize that democracy is not a permanent good.

One of the ways to reclaim our moral center is for America to show that we want something better. An absolute good happens when we change our national leadership, when we reject the current order. That restores, at least, an intentionality on our part. The next president is going to have to revisit the Paris Agreement and our national commitment to action on climate change. The next administration must reexamine what we've done with Iran and the international accord, as well as repudiate dictators and populist bullies around the globe. The immediacy of our response to what has been done in the name of American citizens will speak to the world of our intended direction moving forward.

We restore credibility when we demonstrate that the United States has a new crop of leaders, reflective of the values we espouse, who are willing to do the work of building those relationships again, and that there is a sustained opportunity to fix what was broken. Equally critical, we must examine our laws to assess how any demagogue could infiltrate and shift our nation this quickly and assuredly. We must ensure that we can never lose ourselves or our place in the world again.

CHAPTER 10

The Next Best Version of America

I'm angry. More than a year after the 2018 election, I can scarcely stand to watch footage from the campaign without my mouth tightening and my eyes narrowing. I'll see the faces of Georgians illuminated on the screen, some cast in the bright sunshine of an outdoor rally, others in the artificial glare of gymnasium lights, and I remember the press of an elderly kiss to my cheek in Sandersville or a spontaneous hug from a gangly teenager finally old enough to vote. I have dug through footage of voters sharing their stories in order to capture them here; and more than once, I had to press pause to give myself a moment—because I believed Jordan when he told me about his passion for early childhood education as a protective shield for our youngest citizens, when Isabella and Kenneth claimed our common values in Spanish, when Kristy and Amy gave me my name sign in ASL. I believed we had a fair shot at winning.

But in Georgia (as in other states like Florida and Texas), the winners staked their campaigns on using disgust for immigrants,

and—in my beloved Georgia—my opponent promised to sign legislation to demonize the LGBTQ+ community. In all three cases, oppression won with voter suppression pushing away black and brown voters, young people, the elderly, the poor, and new citizens. At the end of the day, the victims of these campaigns saw how little their needs influenced elections. And that too enrages me.

In the intervening months, I have done interviews and podcasts and penned op-eds, but I don't believe I have yet fully captured what I learned in 2018—especially in those ten days after the election. The morning after the election, our core team met in the dining room of the suite at our hotel. My parents and siblings had gone back to their rooms at around two a.m. I fell into a restless sleep closer to four, and I was up again a few hours later. A cold I had been ignoring for days pounded through my head. But I had to focus on our game plan for the next phase.

In most contests, Election Day is the end unless the state has runoffs. Georgia is a runoff state, but that morning, the Associated Press still refused to call the race. Rather than check the secretary of state's website, I waited for my campaign manager, Lauren, to update me. Before we'd gone our separate ways, I'd authorized a series of television ads to encourage voters to cure their provisional ballots and call our hotline if they experienced voter suppression. When Lauren arrived, a little past eight, she was livid. Thousands of calls had poured in already, and by the end of the process, the hotline would log more than 80,000 calls. Soon, Dara Lindenbaum, nearly four months pregnant with twins, joined us, followed by Allegra Lawrence-Hardy. The duo comprised our legal brain trust, and they'd been advising Lauren and me since our 2014 fights with Brian Kemp.

Over the next few hours, we plotted our strategy and made

assignments. None of us cried at the table as we plowed through our options, but the meeting had an air of unreality. Eighteen months of campaigning. Three years of planning. And still no answers. Eventually, our conclave broke up because Allegra and Dara had to see about extending their hotel reservations. The candidate suite transformed into our post-election War Room. I handed out extra keys and waited patiently for everyone to leave. Then I crawled back into the rumpled hotel bed, ordered up *Sorry to Bother You*, and waited for tears to come.

They didn't flow when my parents came by to check on me. When my brother Richard brought me breakfast. Or when my older sister told me she'd postponed her flight home to Kentucky for another day. I hugged Andrea harder than necessary, but I refused to cry. Part of me knew that tears would mean I accepted defeat, that all our work was over. The stoic part of me never liked crying, and I was proud that I held it in. It wasn't until my brother Walter called from a prison phone, more worried about me than himself. After I hung up the phone, the sobs didn't seem to stop. But I quickly had to tamp them down when I saw the time and realized I had another call to do with donors to raise money for overtime.

Over the next ten days, I tried to speed myself through the seven stages of grief. I'd read about them coming in turn, but they seemed to attack me all at once. Shock, denial, bargaining, and testing got funneled into a series of lawsuits I authorized or learned about, and though we won most of them, there was no relief. With each victory, the numbers between me and my opponent got closer, but with no clear answer.

Anger was ever-present, along with rage and its variations. Until this election, I had never considered myself an angry person. Almost every job I have ever held required navigating warring

factions, picking among competing visions, or simply surviving the low, steady hum of bigotry. My temperament is low-drama and even-keeled, and, to be honest, sustained anger always struck me as a weakness. A person loses focus or, worse, becomes defined by that emotion alone. But I was mad and I couldn't shake it.

I sat with depression, rereading favorite romance novels, assured of a tortured relationship with a happy ending. I watched reruns of sci-fi shows as I camped out on my sofa at home. My youngest sister had been designated by our family as my minder, so she found an excuse to visit almost every day for the next week. Like clockwork, my campaign manager reported the election news daily, and while the gap closed, I had a feeling the distance would be insurmountable. By day six, I decided to skip over acceptance and go straight to a new stage that I like to call plotting.

On a legal pad that I kept on the coffee table for Lauren's daily reports, I sketched out three new ways I could continue to do the work that has fueled me since I was a teenager: fighting for the rights of those who are too often left behind or ignored altogether. The results were Fair Fight Action and Fair Fight PAC to tackle voter suppression and engagement, Fair Count to address the census and beyond, and the Southern Economic Advancement Project to still generate the progressive policy ideas I likely wouldn't be able to promote as governor.

I talked to my friend Will about the closing window of the election, and he asked if I planned to concede. I tried to respond, but I couldn't form the words. The idea of accepting what happened to 80,000 disenfranchised voters—that I knew of—was unbearable. On the night of November 15, when Lauren and I realized we'd gotten as close as we could, I used that same legal pad to sketch out my speech of non-concession. Yet, as I rejected

the tradition of conceding, as I developed these groups and raised millions of dollars to fund their efforts, as I stood before America delivering the State of the Union response, the constancy of anger dogged me. Its permanence unsettled me, still catching me unawares at odd moments.

In the end, I forced myself to confront the awkward, sullen feelings that burned and chilled inside me at the same time. Losing the contest for governor wasn't my first defeat, and I had prepared myself for the possibility. Chelsey Hall, my onetime special assistant, now adviser, had the job of staffing me as I reemerged into the public eye. As I made my way through airports, grocery stores, and hotel lobbies, I realized what kept me so irate. Over and over again, people who'd never met me rushed up to thank me for running. Chelsey would hold handbags and watch luggage as they hugged me. The first few times, I was nonplussed by the attention. I'd prepared myself for humiliation, for people avoiding eye contact or offering me advice on what I *should* have done. But that never materialized.

Instead, I found flight attendants who passed notes to me that they'd written on napkins, grateful that I spoke up for them. Maintenance workers pushing their carts through office buildings clasped my hands or hugged me spontaneously, whispering that they voted for me and their votes got stolen. Well-wishers from outside Georgia asked for selfies to show their kids because the campaign had ignited a passion in their households. I sat in a waiting area between trips and spoke by Skype to the overworked, underpaid women of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and I marveled as they celebrated the 250,000 volunteers they had amassed in 2018—cheering their newfound power instead of bemoaning the election's results. I visited with labor leaders who had poured into our campaign, from early

endorsements to thousands of volunteer hours to financial support that placed hundreds of field workers on doors. To a person, they thanked me for our campaign without a hint of resentment for its bitter end. On a connecting flight through a midwestern state, a middle-aged white man in camo saw me come off yet another plane. He stood just past the gate, stolid as a tree trunk. Chelsey had been a few rows behind me, so I waited alone, watching him as he watched me. After a few seconds, he marched up to me. "You Stacey Abrams?" Knowing I couldn't lie, I said, "Yes, I am." His rugged face broke into a grin. "Can I give you a hug? You kick ass." I embraced him, just as I had the group of young black and brown students at the college where I spoke, kids who told me they knew the vote was rigged but they weren't going to stop. My rage exists because they deserve more, but our nation is in trouble and I know why.

America, like much of the democratized world, stands at a crucial moment in history. Concepts of justice and fairness have become more fragile, and now the core elements of our democratic system of government are under siege. While the United States has always fumbled in its pursuit of social equality, what we accepted as basic principles have been eroded, and truths about who we are as free people have shifted—and not for the better. Whether it's the stories of police brutality against blacks, migrant children dying for lack of care in American detention centers, attacks on food stamps for the poor, or the emergence of authoritarian regimes where proud democracies once stood, a disconnect is spreading between who we say we are and how our systems behave. The cause is clear: a massive and inevitable change in the demographic makeup both in the United States and abroad.

America's rapidly changing population has hit a diversity

inflection point, one where a new political majority has fully emerged. Rumblings about this multiracial, multiethnic, youth-driven majority's clout have grown over the past twenty years. Yet prognostications of a sea change toward a progressive movement have been met with skepticism about whether such a coalition could actually be realized. We first saw glimpses of this progressive promise in the 2006 midterm rout that swept in the first woman Speaker of the House and became manifest in the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. But with the failed elections of 2010, 2014, and 2016, most of us started to believe that a coalition of the marginalized and our allies could never assume real power. Proving the point, political candidates and the Democratic Party have struggled to reliably engage this new demographic group—nibbling at the edges of success but refusing to put the weight of an election on their turnout.

Part of the challenge is external: a pervasive, systemic process of stripping the right to vote from some and building obstacles to access for others. The power of voting is real, as are the policies that mute the humanity of our fellow citizens like Trump's screeds against people of color and a political financing system that preferences the white, old, and wealthy. But the threat is also coming from inside the coalition itself: citizens grappling with racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty are the least likely to trust in or utilize their votes. Worse, they are told that it's wrong to seek out candidates who look like them, share their experiences, or speak aloud about solutions for them. Underlying it all is shortsighted planning that responds to the problem at hand rather than constructing long-term solutions.

In the end, we expect voter suppression, voter disengagement, cheating, and factionalism; and the candidates who should engage our burgeoning cohort to win victories are afraid to

reach out. We see these wins when they come as political singularities, admirable but not replicable. This dismissal of a treasure trove of voters persists despite transformative victories around the country and across multiple years, where women, people of color, LGBTQ+ candidates, and young people became the visible hope of the New American Majority. Close losses in unexpectedly competitive territories also demonstrate that demographic changes have come to fruition as a political road map. Yet, as we fight against those invested in the status quo and our friends too afraid of the potential of this mélange of opinions and needs, we must come to grips with our victory. What comes next is the how: how does a progressive movement become a permanent political force when neither its enemies nor its allies truly believe it's real?

We have to reclaim the notion of what democracy means. A major part of this project is that we have to stop thinking about elections as being about candidates. One of the things I say that infuriates the Right, but I mean it sincerely, is that in Georgia, we *won*. I didn't see victory simply as my getting across the finish line and getting a title. Winning is about ensuring that people who do not think they matter in our system believe that they can lift their voices up. For too long, politicians have treated elections as a single night of results. But as long as we make winning the only thing, when we make crossing that finish line and getting the crown the only metric, we are going to continue to lose our democracy. When winning is all that matters, how you win has less and less relevance. My mission is to remind us that it is not about getting a job. It is about helping the voices of our people be heard. And that's what democracy is. The power and the purpose of our system is to enable the people with the ability to have their values represented and to select their leaders. Any time we erode that capacity, we are eroding the very republic we seek to protect.

Yet, in a democracy, the fundamental objective is driven by math: get more votes from those who share your views, your values, and your priorities. While casting a vote rarely guarantees an expected outcome, each vote serves to tally the intent of the governed. Of course, beyond voting for elected representatives, we cast our ballots for a host of other items. In some states, ballot initiatives allow citizens to write their own laws of the land, and the elected and appointed governmental officials are supposed to be bound by the will of the people. A number of jurisdictions require citizens to vote before bonds are issued or taxes raised, to set limits on how much can be collected, or to dictate how the dollars are spent. We hold elections at nearly every level of government, from school boards and city councils, to judges and state legislators, to Congress and the presidency; and if you live in Duxbury, Vermont, you can vote for dogcatcher. Regardless of the level of government, the impact of the role, or the breadth of impact, voting is power.

Identity politics reflects how we filter our choices. In the current age, what has become controversial is how distinct identities are and how effectively both candidates and voters have leveraged identity to make strides for their values. Recent elections now routinely include the mention of a first: first Muslim mayor, first Native American congresswoman, first transgender state representative. This effective use of identity—either to pick a candidate or to rally a voter—has upended the traditions of American politics, and with that transformation has come a resentment from those who do not see themselves in the description. Academics have parsed the legitimacy of identity politics, and pundits have written think pieces decrying its salience. More frequently, critics use a revulsion of identity politics—ones based on marginalization or disadvantage—to scare voters into

believing their particular choices cost them victories in elections. However logical the argument may sound, though, the reality is that as those outside the norms of politics rise, so too do various rationales for their level of success or defeat. Candidates do not win or lose because they express concern or solidarity for others. They win or lose because they ignore it or because some voters are afraid of it. But in the midst of demographic upheaval, the rise of voter suppression and the denouncement of identity politics by the marginalized share common cause. Voter suppression serves to block access for those who are not considered full citizens because of race and status. And rejecting identity politics tells the same groups that their difference not only doesn't matter, it is harmful to their progress.

But the integration of voter access and identity is the fundamental purpose of democracy. As a nation, we organized ourselves to delegate authority over both the most profound and the most mundane policy matters to the people. In reaction to the tyranny of a monarchy, we established an inclusive, independent process that, in theory, assigned equality to all citizens by virtue of the vote—not by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or physical ability. The only hurdle was supposed to be gaining citizenship. Yet, as history and current-day behavior show, we continue to struggle to believe that full citizenship belongs to all who are entitled to hold it. Instead, for more than two hundred years, we've seen the act of voting thwarted based on identity. And we've witnessed the very identities thrust upon communities by the majority used as a justification for suppression and oppression. The result has been a silencing of voices and, worse, a silencing of ideas and a disconnection from what people need to actively participate in our nation's future.

In a democracy, if we do not hear from everyone, the

complexity of our communities goes unaddressed and our national ambition is incomplete. When citizens feel unrepresented or, worse, exorcised from the process, disengagement follows. Often, those potential voters who sit out elections are decried as apathetic, and too many of them would agree with the description. I recently saw a YouTube video by a hip-hop artist named YelloPain. The opening sequence broke my heart as he tours his neighborhood and bitterly describes how useless voting seems. He invokes the promise of the Obama presidency, then laments all the ways life failed to improve. His damning indictment of the act of voting seems at once logical and tragic. But with his next verse, he rips into the fiction of voter apathy, and in his rapid-fire poetry, you come to understand that his reaction is more aptly treated as despair and disillusionment. Like him, eligible, silent voters tend to come from communities that have traditionally been ignored by politicians and by policies. He details the travesties of a system that fails to connect the dots between voting and change.

When I answer questions about why the most oppressed citizens do not vote, I describe the eighteen-year-old growing up in intergenerational poverty. She can be forgiven for not believing a campaign slogan that promises a quick fix to the housing and hunger crisis she has lived through her entire life. The same is true for a middle-aged man who lost his manufacturing job and, with it, the health insurance that provided coverage for his family. Or the black family burying a child killed in a police-involved shooting. As our country shifts in its economic production as well as racial and ethnic composition, disengagement will likely follow its traditional pattern and become disaffection. Whether the result is Occupy or the Tea Party or Black Lives Matter, our current age has seen what happens when people don't feel represented.

What YelloPain does next is a stroke of artistic and activist genius. He deftly illustrates how understanding and engaging in the political system is an issue of survival. Like a modern version of *Schoolhouse Rock!*, he explains the three branches of government, connecting their failures to our own. From health care policy and climate action to the social safety net and high finance, our votes determine how the public and the private sectors operate and where they intersect. More important, like YelloPain, we must internalize that the ferocity of our engagement in every branch of government, at every level, decides whether those in charge pay any attention at all.

The difference in how we approach questions of access and opportunity depends heavily on how one sees the role of government. If a pollster queried the average person, most would say they don't think that anyone should be homeless if they work a full-time job. They would say that Americans shouldn't die from curable diseases because they lack health insurance. Our nation ostensibly frowns upon theft, and we encourage education. Yet, these common beliefs require public action to guarantee implementation and permanence. For voters, political party labels serve as shorthand for candidates, in lieu of full-fledged investigation. And parties serve as guideposts for policy making. Whether the choice presented is to elect an official or to defeat legislation, the act of casting a vote remains the key. It is a key that unlocks access to opportunity, to change, to the interconnected webs of commerce, politics, and social justice we know we want, and they want us to keep that door closed. But there is absolutely no change if we let the door stay locked. Only if people vote will their voices be heard and their lives change.

Our time is now. We have the numbers, the mission, and the opportunity to start constructing the next best version of

America. Each of us has the obligation to defend our democracy. This week, every one of us can ask five strangers if they have registered to vote or if they've recently checked their registration. If they haven't, direct them to Vote.org. If they check and are missing, or if they have ever faced voter suppression, contact FairFight2020.org. This month, we should identify and contact our city councilmember, our county commissioner, *and* our state representative. Yes, all three, because each manages a distinct set of laws that govern our lives. If all you do is send a quick note to introduce yourself, or leave a voicemail about an issue you care about, then that's good enough. Elected officials work for us, and they do their best when they know we are paying attention. If you want to up the ante, ask them how they plan to support fair redistricting for your community. Finally, this year, volunteer to reach out to unlikely voters through a campaign or an organization. Whether you help out a presidential campaign or a school board race, ask specifically to be assigned to the lowest-scoring voters, the ones who haven't shown up in years. They are the ones who need to know they matter. And don't worry if you hate knocking on doors or prefer phone calls or you'd rather send postcards. Pick your lane and then invest in someone who thinks they are invisible. If you're reading this after the presidential election, no worries. There's always a campaign happening somewhere in America.

With our collective commitment, the best version of America is within our grasp: one where we guarantee a fair chance to shape the discourse, knowing that victory is not a given; where we understand that sometimes, the fight is the thing. But unless we are committed to the battle for the soul of America, we will forever be held back by our weakest moments.

I believe in more. Because I believe in us.

Afterword

As this book goes to print, the world is grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, a novel coronavirus that has spread to nearly every continent, and whose victims cut across race, class, gender, and creed. Responses to the threat have varied, and resources to battle its attack have been in high demand. Testing protocols, economic supports, and health care regimes have been stretched to their limits. Worse, information flows that could have prepared countries to respond more quickly and effectively have been stymied by distrust and gamesmanship. The United States, a nation always called upon to lead such efforts in decades past, has fumbled its own defense to COVID-19. Although President Trump was warned by his own experts for months, he responded to the crisis with half-truths coupled with a blasé attitude about what was to come. Health officials went unheeded or were silenced, while political action focused almost exclusively on the virus's toll on the stock market. As the pandemic spread across the country, governors found themselves battling not only