

Paul Weiss Leaders: It's Time for Legal Industry to Fight Voter Suppression Efforts

Paul Weiss chairman Brad Karp and partner Robert Atkins, co-chair of the Brennan Center For Justice, call for law firms to join corporate America in standing up to legislation that may suppress voting rights.

By Brad S. Karp and Robert Atkins
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We applaud and join the growing chorus of business leaders and voting rights advocates calling out the new wave of voter suppression legislation for what it is—the rebirth of Jim Crow. Just Wednesday, dozens of Black business leaders, led by Ken Chenault and Ken Frazier and joined by our own Ted Wells, published a “Memo to Corporate America” in *The New York Times*, imploring companies across the country to take a stand in support of equality and democracy.

It also is time for lawyers to take a stand. Lawyers in public service and the private bar have played a vital role in reversing a century of overtly racist voting laws that deprived generations of African Americans of the right to vote. It is time again for the legal community to stand up against the renewed, cynical efforts to undermine our Constitution and to fight to protect the voting rights of all Americans.

As it has been before, Georgia is the battleground in this fight for justice. Last week, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law a set of sweeping changes to the state’s election policies designed deliberately to make voting more difficult—and



Photo: John Disney/ALM

Voting lines outside the Gwinnett County Election Offices in Lawrenceville Georgia on the third day of early voting in the state. The wait was three hours at this site.

even impossible—particularly for African Americans. The legislation adds obstacles to absentee voting, includes onerous voter identification requirements, restricts the use of ballot drop boxes, and even criminalizes the distribution of food and water to those waiting in long lines to vote—all of which will disproportionately suppress the participation of Black voters. To make sure the message of voter suppression was not lost on the people of Georgia, Kemp signed the new law beneath the painting of an old plantation where more than 100 Black slaves worked in bondage.

We are proud that our firm, for 60 years, has fought against Georgia's sad legacy of racial discrimination in voting, from advocating for the principle of "one person, one vote" in response to Georgia's racist reapportionment plan of the early 1960s in the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Gray v. Sanders* (1963), to fighting Georgia's more recent attempts (under then-Secretary of State Kemp) to purge lawful voters from Georgia's voter registration database in advance of the November 2018 elections. In 2020 and 2021, we partnered with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in advance of the high-stakes U.S. Senate run-off elections in Georgia to provide rapid response legal support to head off state or local activity threatening to impair access to the ballot.

Tragically, Georgia is not alone: according to the Brennan Center for Justice, state lawmakers in 43 states are supporting over 253 bills that seek to restrict voters' access to the polls. In Arizona, the state legislature has proposed restrictions on voting by mail, new onerous voter ID requirements and aggressive measures designed to remove voters from the state's vote-by-mail list. The Texas legislature has proposed a total prohibition on absentee ballots, and Iowa has passed a new law limiting early voting.

The current law in Georgia, and the similar voter suppression tactics in states across the country, require a strong and concerted effort from members of the bar to protect the rights of voters. We should use our voices and our resources to advocate for the passage of laws at the state and federal levels that would expand access to the ballot and make voting easier and more available to larger numbers of citizens. We also should take up the call to challenge voter suppression laws on behalf of voters and voting rights groups in court, as some are already doing in Georgia. Whether it is through litigation, appearing as *amicus curiae*, or other advocacy, the legal community has a steadfast obligation to protect voting rights, combat voter suppression efforts and safeguard our democracy.

We look forward to partnering with the business community to make our voices heard loudly and clearly.

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