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President's Testimony on Voting Rights

Good morning, I am Rev. Robert Collier Sr. pastor of Galilee Baptist Church and president of the Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vicinity.

I am grateful to State Senator Sharif Street for the opportunity to testify about the challenges to voting rights. I am sure you all are aware that on August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others. The voting rights act expanded the 14th and 15th amendments by banning racial discrimination in voting practices. The act was a response to the barriers that prevented African Americans from voting for nearly a century.

A brief background to this signing. On March 30, 1870 the 15th amendment to the Us Constitution was passed. It stated that a citizen's right to vote could not be taken away based on their race. Then Jim Crow Laws were introduced which were barriers at the state and local level that prevented African Americans from voting. White supremacists used intimidation, literacy tests, and poll taxes to scare away African American voters.

From the 1880's into the 1960's, a majority of American states enforced segregation through "Jim Crow" Laws. (So called after a black character in minstrel shows). From Delaware to California, and from North Dakota to Texas, many states (and cities too) could impose, legal punishments on people consorting with members of another race. The most common types of laws forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated.

Right here in Philadelphia there was a classic example of trying to prevent Black people from exercising the right to vote. We have a statue at City Hall honoring Octavius Catto, an educator, scholar, writer, accomplished baseball player and Civil Rights activist, who was killed outside his home on South Street on October 10, 1871 when he was only 32 years old. The date of his murder is significant because it was the first election day that African Americans were allowed to vote in Philadelphia. Thus, Catto never got to exercise his right to vote. Many Whites in Philadelphia did their best at that time to stop the African American vote in any manner that they could.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? The same attempt to prevent Black people from exercising their right to vote is happening once again in 2021, 150 years after the death of Octavius Catto.

So, what are those challenges that we face today that want to prevent us from voting? We've seen attempts to repeal the Voting Rights Act of 1965. They have been many attempts to weaken the Voting Rights Act through various states passing voter suppression laws. Right here in Pennsylvania there were lawsuits challenging the outcome of the 2020 Election Results. And it isn't over yet, with millions of dollars being wasted on frivolous lawsuits trying to overturn the results of

the 2020 Presidential election. That money could be better spent on donations to feed every hungry child in America.

Then there are the recent voter suppression acts that some states actually passed. Listen to this information that I got from the Brennan Center Website and other internet sources/

Between January 1 and July 14, 2021, at least **18 states enacted 30 laws that restrict access to the vote**. These laws make mail voting and early voting more difficult, impose harsher voter ID requirements, and make faulty voter purges more likely, among other things. More than 400 bills with provisions that restrict voting access have been introduced in 49 states in the 2021 legislative sessions.

The new laws restricting voting access are not created equal. For example, four of these laws are mixed, meaning they also contain pro-voter policies (IN S.B. 398, KY H.B. 574, LA H.B. 167, OK H.B. 2663). Other restrictions are narrower in their scope (e.g., NV S.B. 84, UT H.B. 12). Three states have enacted broad omnibus voter suppression laws this year (GA S.B. 202, FL S.B. 90, IA S.F. 413), while Arkansas, Montana, and Arizona all passed multiple restrictive voting laws (Arkansas and Montana passed four such laws each and Arizona passed three).

The various sources went on to say: “This wave of restrictions on voting — the most aggressive we have seen in more than a decade of tracking state voting laws — is in large part motivated by false and often racist allegations about voter fraud.”

Texas lawmakers in particular appear poised to enact additional restrictive voting legislation this year. During the 30-day special session that began in Austin on July 8, state lawmakers introduced a [slew](#) of restrictive voting proposals, including two omnibus bills (S.B. 1 and H.B. 3) containing numerous anti-voter provisions.

In response, Democratic members of the Texas House of Representatives [left](#) the state on July 12 for Washington, DC, depriving the chamber of the [quorum](#) required to pass legislation. These state representatives brought an urgent [message to Congress](#), stressing the need to pass federal voting protections, including the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. However, Gov. Greg Abbott has [promised](#) to continue calling special sessions as needed until lawmakers return to the state.

According to my internet sources, Congress has the power to stem the tide. The [For the People Act](#), passed by the House and now awaiting action in the Senate, would mitigate the effect of many state-level restrictions. And the [John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act](#) would protect voters by preventing new discriminatory laws from being implemented.

Well, what can we do about this? Put pressure on the Senate, especially our Pennsylvania Senators Casey and Toomey, to vote to pass both the For the People Act and the John Lewis Act.

Next, we must use our power to vote that we now have to elect politicians, especially Governors, Senators, and Representatives who support equal voting rights for ALL people at the state and federal levels. On the other hand, let's not vote to reelect any politician who votes for voter suppressions laws.

Many of our ancestors, heroes and sheroes, died fighting for the right to vote. Now that we have it, let's use it. We can overcome. We will overcome.

