

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH STACEY ABRAMS,
FORMER GEORGIA HOUSE DEMOCRATIC LEADER

SUBJECT: VOTER SUPPRESSION

MODERATOR: ALISON FITZGERALD KODJAK, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB
PAST PRESIDENT

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ALISON FITZGERALD KODJAK: [sounds gavel] Good afternoon, and welcome
to the National Press Club. My Alison Fitzgerald Kodjak. I am the 112th president of the
National Press Club. And I am the investigations editor in Washington for the Associated
Press.

We have a terrific program ahead, and we invite you to listen or watch or follow
along on Twitter, using #NPCLive. For our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences, please be
aware that in the audience today are members of the general public so any applause or
reactions you hear are not necessarily from the working press.

I'd like to begin by introducing our head table. Please hold your applause until all the
head table guests are introduced. To my far left, I have Robert Weiner, president of Weiner
Public News Op-Eds and a member of the NPC Headliners team. Next to Robert is Myron
Belkind who is a former president of the National Press Club. And we have Eleanor Clift, a
political columnist with the Daily Beast; Wesley Lowery, a national reporter at the
Washington Post. Beside Wesley is Michael Holloman, deputy communications director for
Fair Fight; and Alex Seitz-Wald, a political reporter at NBC News.

Skipping over the podium, to my right is Donna Leinwand Leger, president at DC Media Strategies and a former president of the Club, and she's co-chair of the NPC Headliners team. Skipping over our speaker for a moment, we have Angela Greiling Keane, deputy managing editor for states at Politico, and also a former president of the National Press Club. Beside Angela is David Anderson who is the NPC Headliners team member who organized today's event, so thank you very much David. Next to David is Chelsey Hall, an advisor to Fair Fight. Next to Chelsey is Tia Mitchell, the Washington correspondent at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. And finally, Gregory Korte, the national political correspondent at Bloomberg. [applause]

Today we are pleased to welcome Stacey Abrams to the National Press Club. She served 11 years in the Georgia House of Representatives, including seven as the Democratic leader. Last year, she was the Democratic nominee for governor of Georgia, the first black woman to be major party gubernatorial nominee in the history of the United States. [applause] And she came pretty close to turning a traditionally Republican state blue. She ultimately lost the general election by just over one percentage point to Georgia's then-secretary of state Brian Kemp. It was a hotly contested outcome, believed by many, including Ms Abrams, to be the result of widespread voter suppression. After a ten-day standoff, Ms Abrams suspended her campaign, but notably did not concede.

Abrams has spent the last year on a mission to stop voter suppression, not only in Georgia but around the country. She created two organizations – Fair Fight, to ensure all people can vote do – and Fair Count, to guarantee that the 2020 census is fair, accurate and counts everyone equally.

She's helping to lead a federal lawsuit to overhaul Georgia's election system. She and the others suing contend that the current system impaired citizens' ability to vote in the 2018 gubernatorial election, depriving them of their constitutional First, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment rights.

So she's a force to be reckoned with, and no doubt one to watch in the years ahead. Please join me in welcoming Stacey Abrams. [applause]

STACEY ABRAMS: Thank you. Thank you to President Fitzgerald Kodjak. Thank you to all of the past presidents. This is a very illustrious table.

I'm going to begin by announcing I am not the governor of Georgia. [laughter] There are some who believe I'm confused. I am not. But as Alison pointed out, in 2018, we had a bit of a contested election. In the process of running for governor of Georgia, I began a campaign that was grounded in the notion that everyone who was eligible to vote should vote, particularly those communities that had long been left out of the voting process in the state of Georgia. But on a larger level, they've been left out of the decision-making process for our state.

My campaign began with the notion that we were going to center communities of color. These are the fastest-growing populations in our state and they were lagging behind in having their voices heard in the process. We centered marginalized communities and disadvantaged communities, talked to groups that no candidate had really engaged.

I became the first gubernatorial nominee to ever march in a gay pride parade in the history of the state of Georgia. I also went to Dragon Con and the So So Def Concert. [applause]

We went to everywhere. We talked to everyone, and we used a clear and consistent message. I used the message when I was down in Albany, Georgia, and when I was in north Georgia where they filmed *Deliverance*. We went everywhere. But in the end, I did not become the governor of Georgia.

On November 6th, when the ballots were coming in, when the votes were being counted, at the same time this was happening, we had already received 30,000 phone calls alleging issues of voter suppression. And in the next ten days, between November 6th and 16th, we received another 50,000 calls; 50,000 people who had experienced difficulties in casting a ballot in the state of Georgia. And as result, on November 16th, I made a very controversial speech where I acknowledged the legal sufficiency of the election, but I refused to concede the rightness of a system that would let so many people's voices be silenced.

Now, there have been recent days of comparison between me and the former governor of Kentucky, that he and I share some allegiance in refusing to acknowledge outcomes. Yesterday, he conceded the election. And I congratulate him on doing so because he alleged irregularities that he could not prove. We, on the other hand, could prove our concerns.

It began by having a secretary of state who refused to step down from that post when he became a contestant in the race. When you are looking at the third world nations being investigated for voter irregularities, one of first things you look at are the strongmen leaders controlling the outcome of the election. Well, in the state of Georgia, the secretary of state was the contestant, as well as the scorekeeper. And I don't know of any sport where we would let that pass. [applause]

However, in the end, it was the law of the land that he could do so. And my responsibility was to acknowledge the sufficiency of the election, which is what I did. But to say that a law that permitted could not be right, because how can you tell people to trust the system when you cannot trust the person running the system. That is the mission that I'm on.

In the ten days between Election Day and my non-concession day – which is how we refer to it now [laughter] – I spent a great deal of time trying to think about what I would do next if the election did not produce the result I thought. I grew up in southern Mississippi, the daughter of two civil rights leaders. My parents were civil rights activists as children. My dad was arrested as a 16-year-old helping register people to vote in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. My mom did the same work; she was just smart enough not to get caught. [laughter]

But they wanted us to understand from our earliest beginnings that our responsibility isn't simply to fight for outcomes we want; it's to fight even when we don't get the outcomes we need. That the moment we step away, the moment we concede that the system has beaten us, then the system has indeed won. And our responsibility is to keep working anyway.

And so in that ten-day period, I was very angry; I was very sad. I went through all the stages of grief. I really spent a lot of time in anger, and eventually moved on, but brought anger with me. [laughter] I find it to be a fun companion. [laughter]

But in the end, what I wanted to make sure I did was commit myself to figuring out what work could be done. Because the reality is whether or not I got the title of governor, there was work I wanted to do that still needed to be done. And so, the first bit of work I knew I needed to do was to focus on the issue of voter suppression. This wasn't new for me. I registered voters as a student at Spellman College. I was involved in civic engagement so much so that I was invited to be a speaker here in Washington at the 30th anniversary of the March on Washington. I remember standing on that august stage looking at way too many people, talking about the needs of the communities that I come from and that I wanted to serve.

I'd started an organization that registered voters in Georgia, particularly communities of color that had been unregistered to the tune of 800,000 in 2014. But I'd also started an organization called the Voter Access Institute because I knew it was insufficient to simply register voters. We had to engage them, mobilize them, and turn them out. And the Voter Access Institute became what I call Fair Fight Action.

Fair Fight is born of the belief that voter expansion requires that we fight back against the voter suppression. And over the last few months, as we did this work, beginning in November, and now a year later, we have tangible evidence that what we are doing is necessary and right. In the state of Georgia, we filed a massive lawsuit, a lawsuit that alleges that the state of Georgia is not protecting democracy as it should. And we believe we are right, and we believe we will be able to prove it in a court of law.

But more than that, it's not enough to simply fight back against what is wrong. You have to promote what is right. And that is why we started a group called the Democracy Warriors, people from across the state of Georgia who have now discovered that you can indeed go to the board of elections meetings. Most of them did not know there were boards of elections to meet with. But they are now visiting those meetings, and because of their visitation, because of their visibility, we've been able to block closures of precincts.

Let me put into context what happened in Georgia. On Election Day 2018, the secretary of state had overseen a system that had purged 1.4 million voters, including a purge of 570,000 people in a single day, the single-largest voter purge in American history. He oversaw the closure of 214 precincts – 214 – in a state with only 3000 precincts.

As the secretary of state, he had proceeded that time by arresting women who had the temerity to actually help register and turn out voters in Quitman, Georgia. He had authorized, along with a state legislator who served as county attorney, following black men home to challenge whether they were indeed valuable electors; basically saying, "Too many black people voted; we believe that they should be investigated." The *New York Times* ran an incredible story about this. But he also challenged Latino groups and Asian-Pacific Islander groups when they had the audacity to register communities. And so, by the time we got the November 2018, my evidence of his bad action was legion.

But more importantly, what we knew now is that more has to be done. And what Fair Fight is doing in Georgia, what Fair Fight Action is doing in Georgia is building the capacity of its citizens to fight back. But not just fight back against the secretary of state, but to fight back against a nationalized system of voter suppression. Because we have to recognize that while voter suppression was a singular example of what happened in 2018, it is not solely committed to the state of Georgia. We know that across the Sun Belt, voter suppression is alive and well. That in the state of Texas, there was a law that was pending that would have criminalized driving people to the polls. Luckily that bill died at the very end of the 2019 legislative session, but the problem is that it made that far.

We know that in the state of Tennessee, because 90,000 African Americans were registered to vote by a group called Black Voters Matter, that in the state of Tennessee they passed a law that criminalizes third-party voter registration, a key because third-party registration is one of the most effective ways to register communities of color.

We know in Arizona they have shutdown 85% of the precincts; 85% of polling places have shutdown since 2005, as Arizona's population grew larger. There is an inverse relationship between shutting down access as your population becomes more diverse. And it has a very deleterious effect on Native Americans because they live on reservations where they have to travel in order to cast their ballot. But instead of being able to go two or five miles outside of the reservation, they now have to travel 10, 20, 50 miles on heavily rutted roads without access to the right to vote.

We know in Florida, Texas and New Hampshire – because it's not just the South – we know that students are facing new challenges to the right to vote. Where early voting populations often on the college campuses are now being told, "You're not going to be able to have precincts where you work, where you go to school." And in New Hampshire, they've created new laws for who gets to register, and who has access directly targeted at students.

In Wisconsin, in Michigan, in Pennsylvania, these are the states that have had voter suppression activities in play and in place for a very long time. And indeed, those affected the outcome of the 2016 election.

But my responsibility is not to relitigate the past, but to use the past as prologue for what needs to be done in the future. And that is why, in addition to Fair Fight Action, we launched Fair Fight PAC and Fair Fight 2020.

Fair Fight 2020 is based in 20 states across the country – the three states that have elections this year statewide, as well as the 17 states that are considered battleground states for the presidency, for the US Senate and down-ballot races so we can flip chambers and make certain we elect secretaries of state and attorneys general who can defend the right to vote in America.

Voter suppression has three components: Can you get on the rolls, and stay on the rolls? Can you cast the ballot? And will your ballot be counted and counted correctly? Those are issues that plague us all. Those are national federal issues that have been relegated to the states. And so, instead of a United States of America with a single democracy, we have 50 different democracies operating every single day in this country.

And we know that voter fraud is often attributed to the challenges we face in our elections, but voter fraud is largely a myth. Thirty-one people in the last billion votes cast have been accused of actual fraud. And usually, it's voter confusion. Because when you cross a state border, the laws change and no one hands you a pamphlet to tell you what's new. But we know that if we have federal legislation, and a restoration of the Voting Rights Act, we can restore our progress towards true democracy in this country. And that is my mission. That is the work of Fair Fight Action and Fair Fight 2020.

But in addition to those operations, I was a state legislator. I took my job as minority leader in November of 2010, and I took office and began my first legislative session in 2011. And by August, I was embroiled in what was redistricting. It was the first redistricting that had happened in our state under Republican leadership. We watched – I watched – in horror as they redrew lines that packed African Americans, that split Latino communities, that scattered Asian-Pacific Islander communities, and that intentionally diluted the right to vote for thousands of people in our state.

But our ability to fight back was mitigated in part because we did not have an accurate census in 2010 in the state of Georgia. We had one of the largest undercounts of African American men, one of the largest undercounts in the country. Because Georgia is a massive state; it's the single-largest state east of the Mississippi.

But the reality is that it is a solvable problem. In 2010, the country had the most accurate census, but Georgia did not. And part of my responsibility is to ensure that in Georgia and around the country, that the 2020 census tells the true story of America. I launched Fair Count because I believe that we can do this work. But we have to be intentional because the current administration is underfunding the census count, and the states that have the largest growing populations, many of those states are not investing enough to ensure that those communities are counted – communities of color, renters, small children and immigrants. Those are populations that must be counted so that they get their fair share of the \$800 billion we will spend every year for the next ten years.

Fair Count is doing its work by going into communities, setting up hotspots. Which sounds like an odd thing to do for a census count, except this is the first time in American history that 80% of the census will be performed online. Even though we know that between

20-40% of Americans do not have access to the Internet. That has not been solved by this administration, despite their intentionality of using the Internet to count people.

We know that we have to step in and step up to help communities that will be left behind because I refuse to allow our communities to be erased from the narrative of what is America. Our obligations are large. [applause]

Our obligations are large because our nation is a big place. Not simply in space, but in heart. We began as an experiment that said that if every person was counted, that we could be able to achieve our ideals. And yet, from the inception of our country, we have struggled with voter suppression. It began with a document that said that blacks were only three-fifths human; you could count our bodies, but not our souls. That excluded women from the story of America. And next year, we will celebrate the 20th Amendment, but we have to remember that it took— I'm sorry, the 19th Amendment. We have to remember that it took until 1920 for women to have a voice. And for black women, for brown women, that voice did not become manifest until the 1960s with the Voting Rights Act.

And that is why it is so crucial that we remember that the gutting of the Voting Rights Act in 2013 transformed voting in the United States. With the evisceration of the Voting Rights Act, 17 million people have been purged from the rolls. In that same period, 1688 precincts have shut down in the states that were once covered by the Voting Rights Act.

We have to remember that voter suppression isn't new, that refusing to count our people isn't new, but that we are. We are a new generation that has new opportunity, new access and new beliefs. And one of those beliefs is that we are all created equal and that equality has to be made real by the way we treat each other. That our responsibility is not simply to call out problems, but to work towards solution.

I wanted to do that in the role of governor, but, failing that, my responsibility remains the same. I am the daughter of civil rights activists, but, more importantly, I'm the granddaughter and the great-granddaughter and the great-great-granddaughter of those who were told from their birth that they were not worthy to be a part of this nation. And in a single generation, my parents went from fighting for the right to vote to watching their daughter stand on a stage as the nominee for the state of Georgia, for governor. [applause]

But what I want next is to win an election. [laughter] [applause] Thank you. But I want to win that election not because of trickery, not because of scheming, not because of whining, but because of working. Working to ensure that every vote is counted, working to ensure that every person eligible to register can do so, working to make sure that felony disenfranchisement is erased from the face of this nation – much as we tried in Florida although they're doing their best to roll it back – making sure that when the 2020 census is done and when reapportionment follows and redistricting follows, it is an accurate reflection of who our nation is. And that the leaders we elect belief in everyone in the country.

I often talk in these speeches about how I won. But I don't say I won; I say we won. Because in the state of Georgia, we were told we were deep red, that there was no reason for

me to run. And in fact, there were lots of stories written about how I was running a futile campaign. That by centering these communities, by lifting up the minority, I was going to isolate ourselves from the majority.

But I am going to end with this: In 2018, in our gubernatorial election, we tripled Latino turnout in the state of Georgia. We tripled the Asian-Pacific Islander turnout for Democrats in the state of Georgia. We increased youth participation rates for Democrats by 139%. African American participation, which we were told in Georgia had maxed out under the election of President Obama, that no one else was going to vote, so why try, we decided to dig deep, and we turned out 40% more. But I want to put that in context: In 2014, 1.1 million Democrats voted for the governor. In 2018, 1.2 million Latin people voted for me. [applause]

The reason these numbers matter is that we wrote a new playbook. We wrote a story for how you can win elections in Georgia. That the myth that you could only talk to certain communities and you couldn't have certain conversation, that those myths were wrong. We had an authentic campaign that began with me being exactly who I am. You can't miss me. I said the same thing everywhere I went and I talked about the same issues to everyone who would listen.

And as a result, not only did we increase Democratic turnout of communities of color across the state, we also increased the white percentage of Democratic voting in the state of Georgia for the first time in a generation. [applause] We proved that you can talk to everyone and increase everyone's participation.

We like to call it the Abrams Playbook, but it's very simple: Invest in communities early. Have an authentic, consistent message. Don't try to cherry pick who you think is going to listen. Make certain everyone hears you. And treat Georgia and the Sun Belt as a real place to fight. Because if we fight, we win.

Thank you so much. [applause]

MS KODJAK: Thank you very much, Ms Abrams. It's hard to know where to start because we have all of these which want to know about the 2020 election. [laughter] But I'm going to start with a little bit about the actual purging of voters from the rolls. Several people have asked about recent news that Georgia is planning to again purge maybe 300,000 people from the voter rolls. Can you talk about what you see happening there?

MS ABRAM: Certainly. So right now, Georgia has notified 313,000 Georgians that they are on the list of people who will be purged if they do not respond to a letter within the next 30 days. The challenge is, they may be right, that 313,000 people should be purged. But given past precedents, we don't believe they're accurate. And our job is to ensure the accuracy of this purge.

But one challenge that has never been contested in front of the Supreme Court, and one of the issues that we argue, is that people are losing their right to vote under what's called

"use it or lose it." Meaning that because they haven't voted in a certain number of elections, that that is supposed to be a flag to say you should investigate, but they're using it as an excuse to remove people from the rolls.

I don't lose my Second Amendment right because I don't shoot a gun on Thursdays.
[applause]

And so, in our lawsuit, we are actually challenging the constitutionality of "use it or lose it." You have the right to vote and you have the right not to vote. And should not be used as an excuse to strip you of your citizenship and your citizenship right to vote in the United States.

MS KODJAK: Can you just, for the crowd, talk about what are legitimate reasons to knock people off the voter rolls?

MS ABRAMS: Okay. So the two I agree with: If you are dead, you should not vote. [laughter] I will stand on that, and I will believe that to the day I die. [laughter] And I think that if you know—

MS KODJAK: Than will you change your mind? [laughter]

MS ABRAMS: I will see. [laughter] I also agree that if you do not live in the jurisdiction, you should not be able to cast a vote in that jurisdiction. Those are two legitimate reasons. I fundamentally disagree with felony disenfranchisement, a practice that is currently used by 22 different states, that was born the Black Codes, which was the response to Reconstruction. It was designed to strip black people – mainly black men – of the right to vote. And they did not exist simply in the South; the Black Codes existed across this country.

I do not believe felony disenfranchisement should be a legitimate reason to strip people of the right to vote. You should clap for that. [applause] And I do not believe that your failure to cast a ballot in a certain number of elections is an excuse to remove you from the rolls. There are other ways to determine where people live and if they are eligible. But it should not be that you lose your right to vote simply because you do not exercise it.

MS KODJAK: This questioner asks, why did you not go to court on the 80,000 people who called you because their vote was suppressed?

MS ABRAMS: We did. We have filed a 64-count indictment— or sorry, we don't get to indict, but we have filed a 64-count complaint against the state of Georgia. That includes the complaints and the affidavits we've been able to collect. Contrary to some who suggest that we didn't have evidence, we have volumes of evidence. We have more than 300 affiants who are being interviewed and deposed by opposing counsel, by the state. And we have a lovely 84-page motion— or order from the judge who refused their motion to dismiss. And so, we have adequate information demonstrating that what we're doing is to serve those 80,000.

MS KODJAK: And what's the remedy you're asking for?

MS ABRAMS: The remedy we are asking for, one is to basically strike down anything that's unconstitutional, but we also want Georgia to be bailed in. Bail-in means that Georgia would once again be subject to preclearance under the Voting Rights Act. The gutting of Section 5 did not eliminate the purview of the Voting Rights Act, but it simply said that you have to now go through a very assiduous process through the courts in order to have immediate oversight from the Justice Department. No state has been successful in being bailed in yet, but we hope to make Georgia the first.

MS KODJAK: You lost, as we mentioned earlier, your—

MS ABRAMS: You don't have to use *that* word, but go ahead. [laughter] I'm teasing.

MS KODJAK: The official tally said that you lost your governor race by less than two percentage points. Would the purges in Georgia impact your decision-making on running for any future seat?

MS ABRAMS: No. My responsibility to run for office is because I believe I would be the best person to serve in that office, and to run because I want to do that job. My obligation in between is to ensure that no matter who runs for office that the right to vote in Georgia is fair and sacrosanct, and that everyone has the a fight when they go to the polls.

MS KODJAK: Which raises the question that everyone is waiting for, but I'm going to ask one more. The Trump administration fought hard to include a citizenship question on the census. They lost the battle, but what do you think in terms of impact that that will have on the census next year?

MS ABRAMS: That's why it's so critical that we have organizations like Fair Count. For example, we're working with the Black Alliance for Just Immigration because black immigrants are often left out of the conversation about immigration writ large. Those populations need to understand that the citizenship question is not on the form, and they need to fill it out because their ability for their children to go to school is directly tied to whether or not their kids are counted in the census. Their access to all of the perquisites of being in this country matters.

And so, as long as organizations do the work, and especially trusted partners, of explaining that the citizenship question is not there, and that the information is private. In fact, anyone who divulges that information will be subject to 72— over the next 72 years, they are subject to five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. And I know of very few people who want to turn your information in for that cost.

MS KODJAK: So we will turn to the 2020 election. We have several questions on the subject of, what's your take on the current field of the Democratic candidates? Who do you support?

MS ABRAMS: I support the winner. [laughter/applause] I think we have a strong field of candidates. I know there have been some new additions. And that's why we have primaries. We have become a very— we are paying very close attention, some of us, to every machination of the election, but we have to remember that in '92, there were 18 people running for the presidency. In recent years, we've sort of changed— our short-term memory only remembers 2008 and 2012, or 2016, but we forget also that in 2016, there was a long, protracted primary on the other side for Republicans. My issue is this: You have primaries so people can speak. Let's wait and see what they say.

No one clapped for that, but that is okay. [applause]

MS KODJAK: We're not for free speech around here, I guess. [applause]

MS ABRAMS: That was not a Jeb Bush "please clap," okay? [laughter]

MS KODJAK: Have any of the candidates reached out to you to try to get your endorsement?

MS ABRAMS: Yes.

MS KODJAK: Which ones?

MS ABRAMS: The ones who called. [laughter]

MS KODJAK: How many?

MS ABRAMS: I know you're a reporter, but I'm a politician; I know how to resist. [laughter] But you're real good, that was nice; just slide that in.

MS KODJAK: I'm not sure this is a different question, but which candidate has the best chance of beating Donald Trump?

MS ABRAMS: The one who wins. [laughter/applause]

MS KODJAK: Many people want know what you think about the late entrants to the race, Donald Trump— [laughter] I mean, Michael Bloomberg and Deval Patrick. We are a year from the election, so when I say late entrants, I'm just using their words.

MS ABRAMS: Again, we have both a protracted and an accelerated process now. We have primaries for a reason. Every state is going to have a different vantage point, every citizen is going to think differently about the candidates based on what they get to see. Right now, we have a Iowa primary, a New Hampshire primary, a South Carolina primary, and a Nevada primary. Those are the only people seeing candidates with any degree of repetition and depth. And they still, we still don't have those elections until February of 2020. We haven't had Thanksgiving yet.

And so, I'm not worried about people jumping in now. If they have the ability to mount campaigns and they have the willingness to put themselves before the people, the people will say whether they want them or not. And so I don't worry about the timing right now.

MS KODJAK: What advice would you give to presidential candidates who are specifically seeking African American votes?

MS ABRAMS: Number one, talk about voter suppression. Voter suppression targets multiple communities, but African Americans have long been the central target of voter suppression. And it's often a key reason for lack of participation. It's not simply that people didn't turn out again in '16; it's that the waves of voter suppression hit a crest in 2016 that challenged and changed the ability for communities to vote across this country.

Number two, recognize that you can talk to African American voters about things other than criminal justice; that's a critical and key issue. But we also care about the economy, we care about education, we care about health care. [applause] And by the same token, the conversation about criminal justice should be had with every community, because it is not solely endemic to the black community. We have the most visible concerns, but we are not the only ones.

And so, that's why I urge that we not cherry pick the conversations we have with people. We need to run campaigns for everyone. You want to be able to isolate issues that may have specific resonance, but it needs to be a subset of your larger conversation in the larger context. The minute that people realize that you're telling one group one thing and another group another thing, they've learned something, but it's not the lesson you want.

MS KODJAK: A couple of people asked whether Medicare for All is a winner in the African American community.

MS ABRAMS: I do not speak on behalf of the African American community. I mean, I haven't gotten that notice yet. [laughter] But here's what I would say. I mean, I just spoke for a lot of us, but that was just advice based on my experience as an African American for my entire life. [laughter]

What I would say is this: We care about health care. Americans care about health care. Part of my campaign was about health care, in part because I believe in it and I believe we need it, but I also got hit because of my personal debt. My personal debt was created in part because my father has cancer. And it is expensive to help take care of an elderly gentleman with cancer. And so, I believe that the answer on health care is not a question of which plan; it's, do you have a plan and are you willing to make certain the answer and the solution is real.

I'm neutral right now. I'm neutral on who wins, but I am dogged on the fact that whoever wins has to have a solution for making sure that everyone has access to health care and that no one loses a life, loses a job, or loses opportunity because they get sick. [applause]

MS KODJAK: Do you think Democratic voters are uninspired or worried about the slate of candidates?

MS ABRAMS: No, I think that those of us who watch and read every piece of— I'm in a room full of reporters so I've got to say this well. I think there is an attention to detail that exists among a primary community that is not necessarily reflective of the broader American populace. And we respond to every gyration, every notice, every tweet, and sometimes that makes sense. But the reality is, we don't know who's inspired because we're not seeing a national campaign. We are seeing a very intentional campaign that's focusing on very specific states and being run with limited resources. And that's going to change how things happen.

But we also have to remember that being inspired is a plus; it is not a necessity. I think the only inspiration you need is the inspiration to vote. And I think that's going to come from any candidate who's successful. Because there is a wonderful counterbalance that exists between good and bad, and we are seeing how that can be lived out in real life. [applause]

MS KODJAK: This person asks, where do you stand on mandatory assault weapon buybacks?

MS ABRAMS: I supported in the state of Georgia the banning of assault weapons. I think how we accomplish that is going to take more conversation, in part because when we allowed the assault weapons ban to fail, it changed the marketplace and it changed the relationship.

I applaud the work done by former Congressman Beto O'Rourke to lift this conversation. I appreciate the complexity of the issue. And I am not dodging the question; I'm just saying the question's more complicated, and one of the reasons we failed to find answers is that we assume that the answer is the thing we thought of yesterday. Sometimes the answer comes about because we actually have broader conversations and more complex conversations. And I haven't had those conversations yet.

MS KODJAK: I'm going to follow up on that with my own question because you're from Georgia, and I think I met your sister earlier who said she came from the CDC. There's been a lot of talk about research by the CDC and other federal agencies on gun violence and the lack of support for that kind of research. Do you think if there were such research there would be any different potential answers?

MS ABRAMS: Absolutely. Because right now, all of our decision-making is based on anecdote. Anecdote is compelling, anecdote is moving; anecdote is not data. And that's the challenge. And so, I do believe it's necessary for us to have empirical data that then allows us to make decisions that are based on actual information.

Now, anecdote is important because it often inspires us to look for the data that lies beneath, but it's insufficient to convince particularly those who are, not intractable but who are hard to move. But my job as Democratic leader – it was my title – I was the minority leader. I could not win anything unless I got people on the other side to listen. And I often found that finding information that was not my information, was not a story I told or something they saw, but was based in either the science or in data, that that actually did help move the needle and we did get people to help us.

For example, we had something called the Green Tea Party. I got the Tea Party to help me with environmental legislation. It was not because I convinced them that climate change is real. It was because I understood the data they needed to see to commit them. And when we found it, we were actually very successful together.

MS KODJAK: This person asks for you to describe the changing politics in Georgia. Is it in play for the Democrats in 2020? And I have a separate question that says, has the case been made that Georgia's now a battleground state?

MS ABRAMS: I'm standing here, so, yes, it's a battleground state. And here's what I mean: If you look at the 2018 election, I received the highest number of votes for any Democrat in Georgia history. I spent a fraction of what is spent in a presidential campaign. And so, if I could get here based on what I had, a presidential nominee can win the state of Georgia if they're a Democrat, if they're willing to make the investment. So yes, we're a battleground state

Number two, we are 16 electoral votes. We have not one but two Senate seats up for grabs. And we were able to take the ancestral seat of Newt Gingrich and get it to Lucy McBath, a gun rights activist. [applause] We have demonstrated our battleground and we – I mean, the name of the group is Fight. So we've demonstrated that fights can happen in Georgia and that we can win.

But let's understand what a battleground state. A battleground state is a state where you have to compete to win. And the Republican Party and the Trump reelection campaign has put Georgia on their top tier of places where they have to fight. They're not fighting because they think they've got it sewn up. And if they have to fight there, we're a battleground state, we just need the other side – our side, my side – to enlist.

MS KODJAK: So who do you think represents the future of the Democratic Party? The Bernie Sanders or the Joe Biden end? Or somebody else?

MS ABRAMS: I push back against those ideological characterizations for this reason: We all contain multitude. On certain issues, I am considered left; on other issues I'm considered center. I am a Christian from the Deep South who is an outspoken advocate for abortion rights. The reality is, people are complex. And so are the people in the Democratic Party. And when we try to be so reductive as to figure out exactly where we sit, we end up

losing people because they know they sit everywhere. That depending on the issue, they move.

And I think we are fighting the wrong battle. We're all on the blue end of the spectrum, but the red end is different. And our responsibility is not to determine exactly and precisely where we all have to sit; it's to have a leader who can help us continue to move the country forward. That's my rubric. Not, which wing of the party you ascribe to, but what future do you see for the country. Because as long as we are litigating who we are, we're not litigating for the people we need to serve. And my responsibility, any leader's responsibility is to look forward – how to win the country and how do we lead this country forward.

But these arcane arguments about how we get to the solutions we need I think too often ignore the broader responsibility that the other side doesn't care and doesn't want us to move anywhere. In fact, they want us to move backwards. That's the part of the party I'm in. I'm in the part of the party that wins. That's my goal.

MS KODJAK: A couple of people ask if you plan to attend the Democratic debate in Georgia next week. And this questioner says, what do you think is the importance of this event happening in Atlanta, and particularly at the venue chosen, the Oprah Winfrey Stage at Tyler Perry Studios?

MS ABRAMS: Michael, did you write this question? [laughter] He's our deputy communications director. This is a perfect question, I just want to give him credit if he did. [laughter] That was a plant? I don't think it was. Look at the stricken look on his face. [laughter]

MS KODJAK: It came in via email, I believe.

MS ABRAMS: So I think, number one, yes, I will be there. I don't believe I am legally allowed to be anywhere else. And I think what it signals is three things about Georgia.

One, we are a battleground state. There are a lot of states that vied for being the location for a debate. They're in Georgia because they know Georgia's in play because Georgia has 16 electoral votes that can be delivered to a Democrat.

Number two, the Tyler Perry Studios I think are symbolic in part because they used to be a Confederate embattlement. The Confederate Army used that place to try to protect slavery. And now, it is one of the largest movie studios in the world. And the stage that is going to be used, the Oprah Winfrey Stage, I think that's just the one we could afford as the Democratic Party. [laughter] But what I think it signals is also the changing economy of the state of Georgia. Georgia is the single-largest production– we are the location for the single-largest number of productions outside of LA, and I think last year we beat LA. Movies are coming from Georgia; 100,000 jobs, 9.5 billion in economic impact. And so, they're coming to Georgia because Hollywood's already there.

MS KODJAK: What makes them come to Georgia?

MS ABRAM: So in 2008, I actually worked with Republicans. It was a bipartisan bill that created a tax credit in Georgia. There have been tax credits in other states, but this was during the wave when states like Michigan and North Carolina were rescinding their tax credits. Georgia offered it. But more importantly, we built in to our tax credit process an ability to build the infrastructure. So it wasn't just that we were bringing the movies there, we were actually training staff, training communities to be hospitable. And then we were able to get studios. But more importantly, we have a full pipeline of opportunity. You can do everything from pre-production to post-production in the state of Georgia right now.

MS KODJAK: This is a question from a high school student. Could you speak about third-party candidates and their role in politics?

MS ABRAMS: So as a state legislator, I co-sponsored legislation a couple of times that would expand opportunities for third-party candidates. Georgia does not really permit it. The bar is set so high that very few third-party candidates can make it onto the ballot outside of the Libertarian Party.

I think robust competition is important. It holds the two major parties accountable. Now, I do not believe we're ever going to become a nation that has 15 competitive parties, but I do think that the routine of having to actually not only compete with the other guy, but to compete with those whose ideas may challenge your own, even if they're on the same side of the ideological spectrum, refines and sharpens how we talk about who we are and what we're held accountable for. So I actually believe that we should expand access for third parties.

MS KODJAK: We have several version of this question: On August 15th, the *New York Times* reported that you have stated that you are, quote, open to being considered for the number two spot by any nominee. Which would be your favorite other name? [laughter]

STACEY ABRAMS: Nice try. [laughter] Look, I'm in a very awkward place that I had nothing to do with. When I started meeting with all of the presidential nominees, I did so because I want them to talk about voter suppression and to acknowledge to all and sundry that Georgia is battleground state. Those are my missions. Very clear about it.

I had a lunch with this guy in here in DC named Joe, and suddenly there were these rumors, which I then had to dispel when I was on this show called *The View*. And then people heard me say that I never wanted to do this. That's not what I said. I said, you do not run for second in a primary. That's all I said.

So once I said that. and then I said I'm not sure what I am going to do, once I announced I wasn't going to run, then the question came again from a lot of you in this room. And so, I've been in the awkward position for the last few months of answering a question people don't usually have to answer until they're being announced.

Would I like, would I be honored to serve as the second to a person who is trying to fix our nation? Absolutely. Would I be open to doing so with any of the top nominees? Absolutely. I'm a Democrat and I believe that I can serve. I'm also a person who believes that particularly women of color, that people who come from disadvantaged communities, that come from the marginalized communities, we cannot be coy about our ambition. We are expected to dismiss and diminish ourselves and to say, Well, I don't know. Number one, I'm fairly straight forward. If I'm going to answer, I'm going to answer. And I'm not, I'm not.

But on this one, it is a critical thing for me because this is the first time I remember in modern history where a young, black woman – and I consider myself young because I am under 46 [laughter] – has been talked about openly as a potential vice presidential nominee, and I am never going to diminish that. And I'm not going to no because the answer is yes. [applause]

MS KODJAK: This many people would like to know if you have reconsidered your decision to stay out of Georgia's two Senate races.

STACEY ABRAMS: No. Next question. [laughter] No, look, as I said earlier, I think you run for the job you want. And you need to want to do the job when you have it. I am proud of my service in the state legislature. I am proud of the work that I was able to do as leader. I do not want to do that work again. My highest and best use, I believe, based on what I've been able to do for most of my life, I'm good at trying to fix things. And often that means creating organizational structures, whether that's companies that I've started or organizations that I've started. I enjoy and I am best at the executive side of my job – although I was a very good legislator. There are people who want to go to the Senate. There are smart, thoughtful, capable people running in this race in Georgia. And they can win if we fight voter suppression and if we invest in the state. That's my mission and that's the work I'm going to do. And I will look forward to celebrating both Democratic Senators when we elect them in 2020. [applause]

MS KODJAK: And we have a theme here. Have you at all reconsidered your decision to stay out of the presidential race?

MS ABRAMS: No.

MS KODJAK: And has anybody urged you to reconsider?

MS ABRAMS: Yes. I have been urged to reconsider. I have said no. I mean no, I'm not going to. No. [laughter]

MS KODJAK: I'm out of questions because that's what everyone wants to know. No, I'm not really. Can you tell us more about the rollout of your national Fair Fight initiative? And specifically, which states you are targeting?

MS ABRAMS: I can give you almost all of them, but there's 17 of them. So the three initial states– so here, the macro: Fair Fight 2020 was designed to think about the fact

that voter suppression exists today. But often campaigns and parties don't think about it until September of the general election. And by then it's too late. By then, the voter purges have happened, the closures of polling places have happened. All of the insidious and interstitial changes that are made to the rules to knock people out, to prevent people from voting, those all occur typically before you get to the general election.

And so, one thing we learned in Georgia, we actually did a lot of work to prevent voter suppression, which is one of the reasons we had a high turnout. The problem is, the person we were running against had even more power. And so, the imbalance remained. But that imbalance, once you know more, you can do more. We want to use the experience and the lessons we have from Georgia to help other states.

And so, we launched early in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Kentucky. For example, we were working with the Kentucky Democratic Party because the way we do this is that we actually hire staff for state parties. We fully fund those staff. We train them. And we make certain that we stay in contact with them as they do their work. The reason we use state parties is because state parties are the only entities in most states that are permitted to be inside the polling place, behind the desk, monitoring what's happening on Election Day. And we need to be there from the start of registration all the way through that part.

And so, we started in those three states. An example is that Matt Bevin and the Republican Party in Kentucky changed the construction of the state elections board, and a few months ago purged— it was discovered that they that purged roughly 175,000 people. Because we were on the ground working with the state party, we were very much instrumental in helping the state party file a lawsuit that a federal judge said was absolutely valid, and they basically invalidated the purge of 175,000 people. Those people were all permitted to vote this November. [applause] That may have had something to do with the outcome of the election.

And so, what we do is we make sure that state parties are able to actually fight back. In addition to those three states, we are in— I'm going to miss some states; if you go to the website, you'll see them all. But we're definitely in Georgia, North Carolina. We are in Florida, Texas, Arizona, Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Nevada, Maine, New Hampshire, a bunch of states in the middle there. [laughter] There are 17 states. Go to fairfight2020.org and you can learn more. [laughter]

MS KODJAK: Should Election Day be a federal holiday?

MS ABRAMS: Yes. Election Day should be a federal holiday, and it should be a federal holiday where employers are not permitted to threaten their workers if they try to use that time. [applause] Or penalize them for using that time. Because what happens, if you're a shift worker, you are often in a state that says, yes, you have this right, but if you don't show up within 30 minutes of the time we've given you, you lose your job. And if we make it a federal holiday, there need to be penalties for anyone who is not permitted to exercise their right to vote if they try to use that holiday.

MS KODJAK: Has the time for the electoral college passed?

MS ABRAMS: Yes. The electoral college is racist and classist. We have to remember the electoral college was not designed because people were worried about Idaho not having enough votes. We didn't know about Idaho. [laughter] We didn't. But what we did know was that in the South, the populations in the South had equal or roughly equal populations to the North. However, because black people were not considered human or citizens, they wanted their bodies to count for the purposes of the population count, but not their humanity. And the electoral college was designed to give Southern states the ability to count the bodies of slaves but not have to allow them to cast votes. And thus the electoral college was born as a compromise.

The other challenge was that in the North, a lot of them didn't want immigrants making decisions and they didn't believe that immigrants and those who were not considered well-educated should be making decisions about who the executive of our nation should be. So it was a combination of racism and classism. Both of those things should be flung to the far reaches of history and the electoral college needs to go. [applause]

MS KODJAK: So we're going to change tune just a little. This questioner asks, do you know Jimmy Carter?

MS ABRAMS: Yes.

MS KODJAK: And can you share any story about him?

MS ABRAMS: So probably the most fun story was, President Carter helped me campaign. We were down in his neck of the woods in Sumter County, where he has helped create a microclinic. Georgia is one of the 14 states that refused to expand Medicaid, even though we're on the bottom 10th on every single metric of health care, including having one of the worst coverage rates, the highest maternal mortality rate, especially for black women, where you are, as a black woman, three times more likely to die from giving birth and from complications thereafter than any other population. And one of the reasons is that Georgia has lost seven hospitals since 2010, that we have a state that is largely rural, and that access to health care is critical.

And so, he helped fund a program that created a microclinic that finally provided services for around a 50-square-mile area. So we were there, and we were talking about the clinic, we were talking about my campaign. We were sitting side by side, and his wife Rosalynn Carter was sitting behind. And he got up to start answering questions. And he kept answering questions. And Rosalynn leaned forward and said, "Jimmy, you're not running again. Sit down." [laughter] And he turns to her and looks and says, "Are you sure?" [laughter]

He is a man who at 92 was willing to stand in the heat of a Georgia sun to help me stand for an office. Because he believed so deeply in the democracy of our nation, and he is

so willing every day that he's able to serve us all. And I will always see him as one of the greatest Presidents ever. [applause]

MS KODJAK: So we're almost out of time. Before I ask the last question, I just want to mention a couple of upcoming events. On December 4th, we have a Newsmaker with Senator Sheldon Whitehouse. And on December 9th, we have a Headliners Coffee and Conversation with Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch.

And I would like to present Ms Abrams with one of the most highly coveted items in Washington, DC, a National Press Club coffee mug. [applause]

And finally, before your gubernatorial race, one of the things you were known for was writing romance novels under a nom de plume. Is there another novel in the works?

MS ABRAMS: So I'm glad you asked. [laughter] I technically still have to write the third novel in the trilogy that I stopped writing when I became Democratic leader so I'm going to get that one done because I don't want to hear from my mom or sister again about this. But I'm actually working on a new legal thriller, and that should be coming out some time in the near future. But it's going to be under Stacey Abrams, because Selena Montgomery is kind of known.

MS KODJAK: Okay, thank you very much for being with us, Stacey Abrams.

MS ABRAMS: Thank you so much for having me. [applause]

MS KODJAK: And we are adjourned. [sounds gavel]

END