

Gerrymandering and the Fight for Democracy in 2020

Annette Bowen

BEFORE YOU READ: Read the title, headings, and information in the box below. What do you think this article will be about?

We Won Voting Rights in 1965

As a child, I remember my momma taking me to the neighborhood recreation center where she voted. It was 1966, about a year after the Voting Rights Act passed. Being a black woman, my momma faced many obstacles, and voting was one of them. I remember the long line of black

people waiting in line to vote. I remember the look on the faces of the white poll workers. Some half-smiled. Some had scowls. It was like they didn't want us there, but we had a right to be there. We stepped into the booth together, and pulled the curtain for privacy. There was a paper ballot and a little hole puncher, which she used to mark the ballot.

The expression on her face was one of determination and pride. Once, I asked her why she voted. Her reply was simple, "If you don't vote, you shouldn't complain."

Today, I remember her words, and I always vote. Many people fought for the rights of black people to vote. They were beaten and jailed, and some were killed, just so I could vote.

Often it is African American and Latino voters whose voices are not properly counted because of gerrymandering.

Gerrymandering



"Gerrymandering" is when people manipulate voting districts to help them and/or hurt others. The name comes from Eldridge Gerry, a "Founding Father" and the governor of Massachusetts, who in 1812 signed a bill that redrew a district in Massachusetts to be more favorable to him. The new district was in the shape of a salamander.

But Voting Rights Are Still Under Attack

Unfortunately, some people have figured out ways to disenfranchise voters even though we have the Voting Rights Act. Take, for example, gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is when a political party changes the boundaries of a voting district to create a result that helps them or hurts the opposition. Often it is African American and Latino voters whose voices are not properly counted because of gerrymandering.

According to Fair Districts Georgia, "In 2015, GOP legislators changed district lines for House Districts 105 and 111 to protect two Republican



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representatives who had barely won re-election the year before." If you take a district that is mostly people of color and carve it up so that the people of color are moved to more white districts, then their voice is weakened. They're not a majority anywhere, so they can't get anyone elected to represent them.

We also had a problem in Georgia in 2018 when Brian

Kemp, our Secretary of State, was running for governor. As Secretary of State, it is his job to make sure the voting is fair, but how can he do that if he is one of the people in the race? He should have stepped aside.

Prior to the election, the Associated Press found 53,000 voter registration applications being held by Kemp's office. The issue was they did not "exactly match" the records the state had on file for the applicant. It turned out that 70% of these voter registration applications were from black people.

In the governor's race, Brian Kemp (a white male Republican) was running against Stacey Abrams (an African-American female Democrat). Kemp won.

The Fight for Fair Elections Continues

Stacey Abrams has now gone on to be a champion against voter suppression and gerrymandering. Her organization, Fair Fight, works tirelessly to promote fair elections, not only in Georgia, but all over the United States.

According to FairFight, voter suppression is a big concern.

- 1.6 million people were improperly purged

Voting Rights Over Time

The articles on pp. 18-22 discuss the struggle for voting rights. Name some of the groups that have had to fight for suffrage. Name some of the groups that do not have suffrage currently in the U.S.

There are lots more *Change Agent* resources on voting, including Issue 26, "Democracy in Action" (you need an online subscription to access this), as well as Lesson Packets, which are freely available to all.

Find additional classroom and program materials about the census and VERA (NELRC's Voter Education, Registration, and Action) at nelrc.org/stand-up-and-be-counted.

from the voter rolls from 2010 to 2018, leaving them ineligible to vote.

- Tens of thousands of people waited in long lines, and some of them left before they could vote.
- Thousands of absentee ballot applications were lost or rejected, disenfranchising voters, particularly voters of color.

fairfight.com/why-we-fight

It is imperative not just that we vote, but that we keep up the fight for full voting rights. If something in government upsets you, do something about it!

Annette Bowen is a former student at Literacy Action in Atlanta, GA. After finishing her courses, she volunteered as a teacher's aide. She still loves to write and has added coloring as a means of relaxation.

