



**STATEMENT OF CONGRESSWOMAN TERRI A. SEWELL**

**BEFORE THE**

**U.S. SENATE**

**COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION**

**HEARING ON**

**“MODERN DAY VOTING DISCRIMINATION IN ALABAMA”**

**MARCH 1, 2024**

Thank you, Chairwoman Butler and Members of the Subcommittee, for inviting me to speak with you today. Everyday, I am honored that I get the opportunity to represent Alabama's Civil Rights District in Congress. I am the Ranking Member of the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections, and I am the proud author of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which will restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

I'd like to welcome all of you to Montgomery, Alabama, which is the site that kicked off the Civil Rights Movement 69 years ago with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It was in this very location, that students, faculty, and staff put their lives on the line to end racial discrimination and set the precedent for Black people to not only be afforded equal access to their rights, but be treated with dignity.

Their sacrifices inspired the movements in Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, and in my hometown of Selma, Alabama where foot soldiers like John Lewis, Joanne Bland, and Amelia Boynton Robinson were bludgeoned on the Edmund Pettus Bridge to ensure that all Americans were given equal access to the ballot box.

The foot soldiers' bravery and courage led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 - the most consequential civil rights law of our time. But in 2006, the VRA was reauthorized for the last time and extremists began to roll back our progress by determining who could and who could not vote.

In 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the VRA in the *Shelby County V. Holder* decision by removing the preclearance formula, which required states to get approval before the new voting laws were passed.

Across the country old battles have become new again, as states have introduced new policies to make it harder for Black people to vote like creating stricter voter ID laws, limiting early voting options, closing polling locations without notice, and purging thousands of voters off the rolls. In 2023, 14 states enacted 17 restrictive voting laws, and in that same year, lawmakers considered 356 restrictive voting bills in 47 states.

Alabama is the epicenter of voting rights, but according to a 2022 Election Law Journal report, our state is the fifth most difficult state to vote in.

Alabama only allows voters to cast absentee ballots if they can provide an excuse, which is limited to out-of-country travel, long work shifts, military service, or incarceration. If they cannot provide an eligible excuse, they are not able to vote, which is a stark contrast to the 28 states that offer no-excuse absentee voting. Alabama voters can only vote by mail if they are able to provide one of the few acceptable reasons designated by the state. To make matters worse, the state fails to offer opportunities for voters to cast their ballots early.

In February, the state legislature introduced a bill to criminalize some of the ways that voters can receive assistance with their absentee ballots. The bill would make it harder for people to receive assistance from their families and friends as they try to request their ballots, fill out their applications, receive guidance about their ballot, and it would prohibit another person from returning a ballot to an election office on behalf of someone else, including an elderly family member. This proposed legislation would be detrimental for rural, low income, minority voters.

State Republicans are more focused on spreading lies about rampant voter fraud, which only makes voters question if their votes count. Moreover, when we try to find evidence of their claims, studies show that there is only one instance of fraud for every 32 million votes cast.

There are several concerns with Alabama's election management due to the state's constant lack of transparency. For instance, there was no statewide voter education for the Defining Moral Turpitude Act, which would help return people with felony convictions to the voter rolls. More than half of the states in the country require disenfranchised people to be notified about the loss or reinstatement of their voting rights, but Alabama creates unnecessary obstacles like making voters pay all their legal fees before they can vote again.

This attack on voting rights is not by happenstance as Alabama has made it very clear which voters, they intend to suppress by defying the Supreme Court after the ruling of *Allen V. Milligan* in 2023. The court ordered Alabama to draw a map that included two majority-minority districts, but Alabama decided to send over a map that further diluted the power of Black voters.

Now more than ever, we must do our part to restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and combat modern day attacks on the cornerstone of our democracy.

I never thought that we would be fighting the same fight that the foot soldiers fought 59 years ago, but it is not lost on me, as Corretta Scott King would say, that "struggle is a never-ending process." "Freedom is never really won, and you have to earn it and win it in every generation."

Thank you again to Chairwoman Butler and the Subcommittee for having this vital conversation today. I look forward to our discussion and working together to restore our vote.