

Maureen Cunningham, Town Councilmember, Bethlehem, NY
Statement on Voting Rights

Read at a Bethlehem Town Board Meeting on September 9, 2021

Today happens to be the first screening of my husband's documentary, *Searching for Timbuctoo*, a film that follows upstate New York abolitionist, landowner, activist, philanthropist, and politician Gerrit Smith. Because land ownership was a prerequisite to voting in New York at the time, Smith around 1846 began giving away land grants - over 100,000 acres in total - to Black New Yorkers who otherwise would not be able to vote, helping them settle and farm on land in the area called Timbuctoo outside of Lake Placid. Smith was helped in this effort by John Brown who moved his family to the Adirondacks to help these new Black farmers and landowners. Many New Yorkers don't know this rich history of ours, but we should. Gerrit saw an injustice in voting rights and acted to correct that injustice. He must have understood that our democracy would be strengthened by more Black residents being able to vote, even if that meant giving away thousands of acres of his own land to make it happen.

Fast forward to today, when we see laws suppressing the vote on the rise around the country, many of them targeting Americans in urban areas; Black, Latinx and Native American voters; and voters with disabilities. These include laws that require photo IDs, limits to early voting, closing polling locations especially in communities of color and on Native American lands, failure to make voting accessible to all voters, excessive voter disenfranchisement, and many more examples. A bill was signed into law just two days ago in Texas, restricting efforts to expand voter access in diverse urban areas of the state and making it a felony for local election officials to distribute applications for mail-in ballots even to those who qualify for those ballots. We see restrictive laws in other states around the country, including those that make it illegal to give food or water to people waiting in long lines to vote.

Just as New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith probably understood, voting represents the core of our democracy and must be expanded, not

restricted, if our democracy is to prevail. We elected officials - like those of us seated here - don't have the right to pick and choose voters; we serve the people, all the people, and the voters choose us not the other way around.

At the federal level, there is an opportunity in the For the People Act that will protect our country's freedom to vote by making sure that voting options are equally accessible across all 50 states, billionaires are prevented from buying our elections, and congressional districts are drawn by independent commissions. This act will provide a national election standard that will make our elections more transparent, protect voter rights, and ensure the voices of more Americans - not fewer Americans - are heard. As an elected official, I support this legislation as a critical step to preserving voter rights and ultimately keep our democracy intact.

In fact, I actually wish it went one step further, expanding the right to vote for anyone over 16, because clearly the youth should have a say in the future of this country and our planet. A colleague of mine expanded voting in his city of Takoma Park, Maryland while on the city council and they have seen only positive results there, engaging young people in policymaking at a younger age.

In the end, protecting voting rights - making it easier for people to vote - is a core of our democracy, and we should all do everything in our power to support voting rights and our democracy, starting with For the People Act at the federal level and other measures. Democracy - as we all know - takes a lot of work and is not something we can take for granted.

As the late, great civil rights and voting rights activist Congressman John Lewis said, "My dear friends: Your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union."

Let's honor the legacy of people like Congressman Lewis and Gerrit Smith and countless others - and make sure we preserve voting as a critical democratic tool for as many Americans as possible.