



Two Extraordinary Days for Race and Electoral Democracy in America

By Michael Sherraden

After the shocking first week in January 2021, and well-justified despair, allow me to take a more hopeful view. The voting outcomes in Georgia on Tuesday, January 5, although overshadowed in the news, may be as meaningful as the riot at the Capitol building on Wednesday, January 6, along with reactions to it. Both of these events—on back-to-back days—are profoundly about race and democracy in America, and both may represent important steps forward.

The U.S. journey toward democracy—from the beginning of White settlement to today—has been long, imperfect, and violent. The country was founded as a White colonial enterprise and still operates very much to the benefit of Whites today. Steps toward full inclusion and genuine democracy have been achieved at times yet always followed by steps backward. In this long struggle, however, some things may have just changed for the better.

Voting in Georgia on January 5 and Political Effects

The results from the Georgia runoff election represent fuller democratic (small d) voting participation than predicted, better expressing the will of the people of Georgia. It happens that these results also change the balance of power in the U.S. Senate at a very crucial time. Whether one agrees with the political outcome or not, democracy has been made more robust, and every

indicator suggests that robust democracy is a bulwark against dictatorship, dysfunction, and terror.

This outcome in Georgia resulted from the leadership of Stacey Abrams. She was blatantly cheated out of Georgia's governorship 2 years ago, in part by her opponent's intentional removal of registered voters from voting lists, but she did not pause to whine. Instead, she went to work organizing the people of Georgia. Against long odds, Abrams's Fair Fight initiative to increase voter participation overcame the built-in White supremacy of Georgia's voting system—in the general election for the presidency and in the runoff election for two Senate seats.

Also, Abrams's initiative joined with other efforts to spur voter participation in Arizona, Wisconsin, and other key states. In both Arizona and Wisconsin, the Native American vote was enough to account for the Biden margin of victory. It is possible that Native votes have never before played a decisive role in the outcome of a national election. American Indians were not even allowed to vote in the United States until 1924, and their voting participation has been strongly suppressed since that time. Yet in 2020, they voted in greater numbers and shaped the outcomes.

Overall, people of color in the United States during the 2020 election cycle actualized a new understanding of what is possible in voting, and they very likely will not forget this. Demographic transformation of the nation's population from majority White to majority people of



color will make electoral reforms more likely in coming years. The U.S. election process may continue to change for the better at the community level, in the courts, and eventually in the Constitution. It is possible that, at long last, White supremacy will be wrung out of our electoral process.

As a result, America could become a different—and much better—place. Our history spans hundreds of years of enslaving, stealing from, terrorizing, raping, killing, and blocking the votes of people of color. But today, as a nation, we can be heartened by the strong prospect for a more inclusive, multi-racial democracy.

The Attack on the U.S. Capitol and Electoral Process on January 6, and the National Response

We are all still in shock from a Trump-incited insurrection against our highest governmental institutions. Yet at the same time, this may have shocked America into greater vigilance.

In this election cycle, Trump attempted to raise voter suppression to a new level by dismissing votes that were actually cast, counted, and verified. Like all suppression of electoral democracy in America, this was active racism. If there is a question about that, look at who showed up for the Capitol protest, the White supremacy signs and symbols they displayed, and what they were allowed to do.

Compare the security during the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Washington, DC, with that during the January 2021 protest fueled by Trump. Had Black people attempted to attack a government building, they certainly would have been contained and very likely shot. But White racists busted through barriers, marched up stairs, forced open locked doors, walked in, paraded Confederate flags, assaulted police officers (resulting in at least one death), destroyed government property, threatened the hanging of public officials, took selfies, and walked out—unbothered.

This is structural racism; it is baked in the cake, “just the way things are.” There has been

discussion about what went wrong in public security that day, and it can all seem plausible enough. But the large reality is that this egregious failure in security and protection of the U.S. Capitol and electoral process occurred during an insurrection by the Proud Boys and other White supremacists. This simple fact is far more explanatory than a review of work assignments on that day, or any sum of individual intentions.

As the nation considers these racist, antidemocratic events a few days later, we now see pushback and a retreat from White supremacy. Trump is defeated and deflated. His toxic supporters will linger, though many are jumping ship. A growing number of corporations have announced that they will no longer give campaign money to the 147 members of Congress who voted to subvert voting outcomes via unfounded (literally made up) assertions. These representatives and senators will have to reconsider. A few may even “see the light” of democracy, as if in a gospel tent. They should never again be entrusted with public office.

Reasons for Optimism

Overall, these events indicate a more empowered, multiracial, and electorally engaged citizenry; perhaps a little better grasp of structural racism in America; and politicians who will think more carefully before championing attacks on government institutions and processes, and democracy itself.

Thus, as a deeply flawed presidency stumbles to a close, the ending is marked by a historic achievement in levels of electoral participation among people of color (in voting in Georgia on January 5) and a determined repudiation of dictatorial interference in voting outcomes (in response to the racist riot in Washington on January 6). As a result, America’s electoral democracy is on stronger footing today than it has been over the past 4 years, and may be stronger than in a long, long time.

The current atmosphere is crisis, but change is born in crisis. Large-scale change regarding race and democracy is possible. A first priority should be fixing our racially biased and fragile voting system so

that everyone participates freely and fairly and all votes are counted equally and directly. As a nation, together, we have an unusual opportunity to shape a better future.

The Author

Michael Sherraden is George Warren Brown Distinguished University Professor and Director of the Center for Social Development (CSD) in the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. CSD's research program in Voter Access and Engagement has documented greater barriers in local voting conditions associated with Black and low-income neighborhoods.

Suggested Citation

Sherraden, M. (2021, January). *Two extraordinary days for race and electoral democracy in America* (CSD Perspective No. 21-02). Washington University, Center for Social Development. <https://doi.org/10.7936/mmj5-zh97>



Center for Social
Development

BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Campus Box 1196
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, Missouri 63130-4899

csd.wustl.edu