

Originally published in

New York Daily News

Opinion

May 14, 2021

Corporations, fight voting curbs: Press statements and symbolic periodic boycotts aren't good enough



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As restrictive voting laws are sweeping the country, an increasing number of business executives are weighing in. [Almost 200 corporate leaders](#) sent a letter to Texas legislative leaders criticizing their state's new laws. This followed similar pronouncements by corporations against Georgia's voter suppression laws, and full-page newspaper ads by hundreds of corporate leaders and law firms condemning such legislation.

Their central message is clear: These business leaders support the right to vote and oppose any legislation that would restrict equal and fair opportunities to do so, legislation that invariably falls hardest on Black and Brown communities and other reliably Democratic constituencies.

We welcome their decision to join the fray. But concrete action is necessary to give their words meaning; this won't be solved by a few threatened boycotts or other symbolic action. Black and Brown voters have been suppressed for decades, and if they focus more on pragmatic steps and less on rhetoric, major corporations — which wield disproportionate political power in

Washington and in state capitals across the country — can play a significant role in reversing the current anti-democratic onslaught.

This begins with saying the truth. It's obvious that the push for restrictive voting laws is being led by supporters of the former president. Yet business leaders are reluctant to stray from their non-partisan posture. Even acknowledging this fact would make a difference in the national debate over the right to vote. That statement by 200 corporate leaders didn't include the word "Republican," or "Trump."

Perhaps if the corporate leaders knew our history better, they would be more willing to speak the truth.

Over the generations, voter suppression has come from both sides of the aisle. In 1877, on the heels of constitutional amendments that dramatically changed the voting landscape, the nation was in the midst of a disputed presidential election. Republicans, then still the party of Lincoln, negotiated a deal: Their candidate would become president in return for removing federal troops from southern states. The Republicans thus abandoned their commitment to civil rights for African-Americans, allowing generations of Democrats to pass restrictive voting laws. Indeed, until the 1960s, white supremacist violence was used to back up these racist laws, suppressing Black votes and maintaining segregationists' hold on political power.

Since then, however, it has been the Republicans who have been promulgating laws that dilute and suppress the minority vote to maintain their grip on power.

Many of the proponents of restrictive voting laws today, just like in the past, disingenuously wrap themselves in false narratives. Today's lie is that the current crop of laws are an antidote to virtually non-existent voter fraud. But, every now and again, the real reason slips out. South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham explicitly said, "If Republicans don't challenge and change the U.S. election system, there will never be another Republican president elected again." And an attorney defending Arizona's new restrictions actually told the U.S. Supreme Court that without such legislation Republicans are at a "competitive disadvantage relative to Democrats."

These admissions are reminiscent of the evidence in *Terry vs. Adams*, a 1953 case in which the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for the Jaybird Democratic Association in Texas to hold white-only pre-elections for county offices. The president of the Jaybird Association had the temerity to testify under oath that the organization was actually founded to exclude African-Americans from voting. Today's laws are not as blatantly racist, but, as we know, can have the same impact.

After they plainly state who is behind these efforts, corporate leaders must take concrete actions to squarely address the problem.

For starters, they can fund court challenges to backward state legislation. They can also withhold contributions from lawmakers supporting restrictive laws, and, instead, donate to supporters of

voting rights. While they are at it, they could put their muscle behind the two voting rights bills currently before the Congress: the For the People and John Lewis Voting Rights acts. These bills would go a long way to mitigate state voter suppression laws.

Corporations should also make Election Day a company holiday, especially as absentee voting and early in-person voting are in some states being made more difficult to access. Doing so would allow people who work long hours and cannot skip work to fully participate in our electoral process.

If corporate leaders are serious about protecting the right to vote, they need to take tangible action to reverse this dangerous trend. Words without deeds are meaningless, and the stakes are far too high to settle for good intentions rather than real change.

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