

Battle for Representation: Southern Disability Community and Voting Rights Advocates Fight to Protect and Expand Access to the Ballot

SPLC Moderator VS: Hello everyone and welcome, and I'm going to invite our interpreter to join me. Wonderful. So, my name is Virginia Spinks and I am a development copywriter for the Southern Poverty Law Center. Thank you so much for joining us today. Before we begin I'd like to go over some important information.

So, to begin this meeting we've muted all attendees to limit background noise as much as possible. But there will be opportunities at the end of the moderated discussion to ask questions or share feedback. To do this, please click on the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. And so that will open a window, where you can type your questions. We may not get to every question live, but we will modify and combine questions to get to as many as we can, during the Q&A. Please feel free to pay attention to the general chat where we will be putting links to different resources mentioned today.

And we're hoping for no technical difficulties during today's conversations, but if there are any challenges our speakers may temporarily go off video to try and keep the audio on interrupted. We are recording this briefing which we will share with you in a follow up email. And for accessibility, we have an ASL interpreter which you can pin to your screen. And we also have closed captioning with a button at the bottom of your screen next to the Q&A button.

With that, it is my pleasure to introduce the Moderator of today's discussion Nancy Abudu, who is the interim strategic litigation director for the SPLC. Nancy previously served as SPLC's voting rights deputy legal director, where she led a team—still leads a team of legal and technical experts dedicated to ensuring the voting rights of communities of color and other historically disenfranchised groups, primarily in the deep South. Thank you. Nancy, welcome.

Nancy Abudu: Thank you Virginia and thank you all for joining us today in this partner briefing and I'm so excited about the panelists that you're going to meet today as we delve even deeper into the issue of voting rights, but with a focus on a particular community, and that is the disability rights community. And how a lot of the voting rights issues that we've been challenging in our state legislatures, through our public advocacy campaigns and definitely through litigation is having a special detrimental impact on this particular community.

As I said, I want to first thank you all for joining. I know that we are still in the midst of a pandemic, although we are hoping that we are getting on the other side of it. But for sure you're here today during some of the comments about how COVID in particular and health issues, specifically have impacted voters when it comes to accessing the ballot. We're also happy that you carved out some time in your day to talk about justice and equity, but through the lens of voting rights, and in fact the SPLC earlier this year, issued a report, which we titled *Overcoming the Unprecedented* because that's indeed what our political landscape during the 2020 election cycle with COVID and other challenges, again to the ballot box, posed. They posed challenges obstacles that, regardless of the significant, several voters, especially in the Deep South work very hard to overcome oftentimes without the government support that they should have received.

And so, hopefully, if you haven't already you will go online and read check out that report, which again provides more details when it comes to what some of those obstacles were, how voters were able to overcome them, in particular of course SPLC's partnership with community groups and helping to make sure that we did indeed have a successful election cycle, which several elected officials across our political aisles have acknowledged was one of the most safe and secure elections that we've seen.

Unfortunately, this reality has been rejected by some of the powers that be and it's been characterized for the most part, as the "big lie." The lie that the election was stolen the lie that you had tons hundreds, thousands of people who were not eligible to vote voting. The fact that they were ballots missing or hidden away all of these lies debunked and yet still providing cover for state legislators in places like Georgia and Florida to pass laws that again

make it more difficult for voters to exercise their fundamental right to engage in political participation and have their voices heard through the ballot box.

One of the laws in particular we're going to be focusing on involves Georgia and Senate bill 202, a bill that the Southern Poverty Law Center we're so happy to say, have partnered with organizations like the Arc of Georgia, and challenging and exposing not only that there is no legal basis for the proliferation and enforcement of these laws, but in fact that if they are enforced, they will actually have the opposite effect. They will make it more difficult for people to engage in the political process.

And so we filed a lawsuit against the GA Governor Kemp, on behalf of multiple stakeholders across various communities to again highlight the unconstitutionality of these laws, as well as their violations of other federal laws. However, we recently amended that company, because we wanted again to put at the forefront the communities that are most impacted by these laws. And there's no way that anyone can or should ignore the special impact that these laws have on those who are part of the disability rights community.

And so, without further ado again I'm so happy to introduce you to our panelists today and, as I say, their names and read their bios I will ask that they please come off mute—turn on their video so that we can see and hear from them ourselves.

So first we have Shira Wakschlag. Shira is the senior director of legal advocacy and general counsel for the Arc. Her work involves directing the Arc's participation in disability rights litigation to advance the rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities nationwide. Shira is also on the board of the Disability Rights Bar Association and she has been a very wonderful trusted partner as we move forward in this GA litigation, so we look very forward to hearing from her as she gives us more information about how the American with Disabilities Act works and this important role in terms of raising claims in the Georgia case.

Next, we have Dr. Eric Peebles, who co-founded Accessible Alabama in 2013 using his first-person viewpoint on the needs of persons with disabilities as inspiration for his work. Since then, Eric has served several roles advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities and in December of 2019 he was appointed by Governor Kay Ivey, to the state of Alabama Independent Living Council. Also honored because Eric is a former client and stood up against the state of Alabama during the height of the COVID epidemic during the height of the elections, to advocate for the voting rights of people with disabilities and played a very pivotal role as we litigated that case through a trial and up the ranks and the appellate level, so thank you Eric so much for being with us here today.

And then, and then, finally, my SPLC colleague Safia Malin. Safia is an outreach paralegal with the Southern Poverty Law Center and focuses her attention in our voting rights practice group where she helps to lead our Community outreach efforts, including managing our team's election protection program in both Georgia and Florida, which it by themselves are big states, but combined, and just a point of privilege to thank her for that tremendous work, which again led to why we had such tremendous voter turnout in both of those states and faced very little problems in terms of those elections and so Safia is going to talk to us a little bit about the outreach work she's been doing, despite laws like senate bill 202 being put on the books and how community groups that we've been working with are overcoming these challenges, while again we still continue to challenge the legality of these laws.

So we're going to start with a conversation a discussion and then as Virginia, I believe, said earlier, open it up, because we definitely want to hear your questions as well. But to get us started, as I said it stated our lawsuit in Georgia brings together a coalition of stakeholders from historically disenfranchised communities that will be most adversely affected by senate bill Georgia senate bill 202

So there's been a fair amount of commentary on how these restrictions will erect barriers to the ballot box on the basis of race and class. But there's been not enough discussion about how these barriers are also going to impact, people with disabilities. that has not been part of the larger public discourse, so I'm going to start with Shira and ask her to talk to us about how Georgia senate bill 202 erects these barriers, with respect to the community that

she concentrates a lot of her attention. And then, specifically to educate us all about the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it plays a role in the litigation brought here in Georgia.

Shira Wakschlag: Great thanks so much Nancy and thanks for having me today. So Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1992 provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities and to integrate people with disabilities into the economic and social mainstream of society. This extends to all aspects of public life, including voting rights for people with disabilities. For democracy to work, it must include everyone. All Americans, including voters of color and voters with disabilities must be able to safely and freely cast their ballots.

Title II of the ADA prohibit state and local governments from imposing requirements that deny people with disabilities, equal access to those activities, including voting and requires these entities to modify their policies and practices to avoid disability discrimination. The ADA prohibits eligibility criteria that screen out people with disabilities, as well as methods of administration that have the effect of defeating or substantially impairing the public entities program with respect to individuals with disabilities.

People with disabilities already experienced barriers in accessing the voting process and SB 202 has made the process even more inaccessible. SB 202 violates the ADA by denying Georgia voters with disabilities full and equal opportunity to participate in the state's voting programs. Some examples include an unnecessary restriction on the use of mobile voting units, new and burdensome ID requirements that force voters to provide ID or other sensitive personal information, each time they request an application for an absentee ballot, and each time they cast an absentee ballot, a delayed and compressed time period for requesting absentee ballots limitations on the use of secure drop boxes as a means of returning absentee ballots, a drastic reduction in early voting and run-off elections, a cruel and inhumane ban with criminal penalties on anyone who provides free food and water or other assistance and relief to Georgians as they wait in line to vote, the complete disenfranchisement of some voters who cast out of precinct but in County provisional ballots, and the restriction and forced by criminal penalties of who is allowed to assist people in submitting an application for an absentee ballot and in submitting the absentee ballot itself.

These restrictions harm all voters, but disproportionately harm voters of color and voters with disabilities and a number of ways. Voter with disabilities, including those in nursing homes or other congregate settings are more likely to require assistance when voting but SB 202 restrict opportunities to provide and receive that assistance. Voters with disabilities are more likely to encounter inaccessible polling places and have trouble getting to the polls due to lack of access to transportation. But SB 202 restricts the use of drop boxes early voting and absentee voting, which provide more accessible opportunities for people with disabilities to exercise their right to vote.

Voters with disabilities are less likely to be able to withstand long lines at polling places, but SB 202 criminalizes providing them with food and water to help them endure the sometimes hours-long wait. Voters with disabilities encounter more barriers in every step of the voting process from registering to vote to access in polling places and SB 202 makes the process more inaccessible at every stage.

Because of all the barriers it imposes, SB 202 denies voters of color and voters with disabilities, equal access to the polls. Nearly 90% of voters with disabilities chose to vote early or absentee in the general and run-off elections. Rather than embracing this unprecedented level of civic participation, SB 202 has made the process inaccessible and unequal for voters with disabilities and voters of color, impinging on their ability to exercise their right to vote.

Unsurprisingly, members of the disability community were often shut out of the SB 202 legislative process entirely. There was restricted access on who could provide remote testimony and disability advocates who sought to testify remotely to protect their health during the COVID19 pandemic were denied the opportunity. Protecting the right of people with disabilities to vote and participate and civic engagement has been a priority of the Arc since it was founded in 1950.

The Arc is the largest national community-based organization advocating for and with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, or IDD, and serving them and their families.

Through litigation policy and programs the artworks to ensure that every individual with IDD has access to the information, advocacy and skills they need to support their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes. We have over 600 state and local chapters throughout the country, including the Arc Georgia. The Arc Georgia has been a leader in the disability community in Georgia and supporting people with disabilities throughout the state to exercise their right to vote, with a focus on ensuring that voters of color with disabilities in rural areas throughout the state could access the polls.

In the recent election season, the Arc Georgia engage in significant voter outreach help voters get to the polls and assist voters with procuring and delivering absentee ballots. The Arc Georgia join this litigation to ensure that we have a democratic process that everyone can participate in. Diverse stakeholders who sit at the intersection of historically disenfranchised communities have come together in this lawsuit to take a stand against these voting restrictions that strike at the heart of the fundamental right to vote, we are proud to partner with the Southern Poverty Law Center and other community organizations to fight this discriminatory law.

Nancy Abudu: Thank you, Shira. And turning to Safia, oftentimes we talk about voting laws and their impact and we talk about in the context of race or class or disability. But I think your experience has been to see the intersection and what happens when an individual has all of those characteristics. What is the compounding impact of those intersections in terms of voting rights from your perspective, Safia?

Safia Malin (she/her): Thank you Nancy and thanks again everyone so much for joining, and as Shira mentioned, you know all the separate provisions in SB202, in and of themselves are disenfranchising and the compounding fact, you know, a fact that all of those provisions have, in addition to the sort of system, voters were navigating previously, has caused an untenable situation for voters moving forward so, for instance, voters in rural Georgia, you know who are already having an issue accessing polling locations, we've had a 13% of our polling locations, I think, since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Section five of the voting rights act, we've already had about 340 polling locations close already, and so getting to a point place in and of itself, an accessible polling place has already been a challenge so voters who amidst the COVID pandemic wanted to partake in and just vote by mail instead, are having to now do what the untenable requirements, we will acquire IDs etc, to be able to access the vote additionally. So being a voter, voter who's a working-class voter, a voter with a disability, a voter of color and being one of you know, a member of all three of those communities, at the same time that it will be really challenging to vote in an upcoming elections and ask Shira mentioned in terms of the processes.

For instance, the text of the Bill that's online currently isn't even accessible for voters who are identified as blind voters. The way that, the manner in which the pdfs have been online are incompatible with some of the translation services voters, blind voters are accessing so it's in addition to not be able to you know, having all of these restrictions being placed on the voting system it's difficult to even get ahold of this information, unless you have access to civic engagement groups or the Internet to get that information on your own. So, in addition to having those challenges, you are now having to seek out that information actively before the next election.

Nancy Abudu: Yeah. And Eric it would be great if you could weigh in. I mean the Brennan Center, one of our partners, has estimated that there are now over 360 voter suppression bills that have been introduced. And so from your perspective with Georgia senate bill 202 to be one example, but also the one, and Alabama that you took a full frontal challenge to, can you talk to us again about how the ADA and the disability rights community, in particular, is impacted by these kinds of laws?

Eric Peebles: First of all, thanks to all for a very cogent explanation of the intersection between voting and the ADA. It's really going to frame a couple points that I'm going to make here. First of all, the Georgia Senate Bill 202 has been exhaustively covered in the media for all its pitfalls and for all its systemic injustices towards minority communities, but I really like to focus on two issues that are that will be extremely problematic for individuals with disabilities and special health care needs.

First of all, the criminalization of providing relief to individuals who are in extended waiting lines by the way of snacks, food, water, you know, access to the restroom, you know, cold cloths to you know lower body core body temperature that's caused by extended lines in the hot Georgia South. And if there's anything that the pandemic, experience has taught us is that the the special health care needs of voters that are a core cause of major disenfranchisement and then secondly the enhanced documentation, ID requirements that are imposed by SB 202 will bring us to a point where, similar to what we had in Alabama, with the *People First v. Merrill* litigation where some of my co-plaintiffs just had claims of not being able to comply with the voter ID requirement and basically, because of health restrictions, because of how concerns brought on by the pandemic, if the individual did not have access to a smartphone with a camera or some sort of in-home scanning printing device, you know the individual, you know, may not have easy access to other public copiers such as at the post office or at the local public library so that's one of the key barriers that will be attempted to address in the *people first v. Merrill* litigation last year.

Nancy Abudu: And in fact if we could follow up Eric in terms of your particular participation. I mean he sued the state of Alabama. And we did it in the midst of a pandemic and really the COVID crisis being the center of that, but some would say that the lawsuit only, you know, was able to shine a light on the challenges that individuals with disabilities face regularly when it comes to accessing the ballot, so can you talk to us a little bit about the bigger meaning of that case *People First* and why it is that we can't, even though we got a great ruling in the district court, The Supreme Court struck that down essentially, why it is important for us to continue to keep the issues of those in the disability rights community center even when we're talking about voting rights.

Eric Peebles: And I think this goes back to something that Shira alluded to during her comment was, specifically in Alabama individuals who individuals who choose to avail themselves of the absentee ballot process are required to submit the identity verification documentation, as well as get two simultaneous witnesses to the completion of their of their absentee ballots, and particularly during the pandemic, I was not in a position to have two individuals in my home simultaneously in order to, in order to, you know, in order to, engage in that, in order to engage in that um simultaneous execution, nor did I, nor did I feel comfortable going out to some entity to get my get my absentee ballot notarized and because that would involve me actually exposing myself to a wide swath of you know, potentially infected individuals.

Because even with the even with governor Ivey's executive order that suspended state requirements for in-person notarization, the, the process still requires that the individual, voter, maintain a chain of custody of their ballot valid, from the time they execute it to the time it is deposited with the, with the, with the county Board of Elections so I sent a plea that would require me to still physically go into the Clerk of courts and, and deposit my ballot, risking ,risking unnecessary exposure to the virus.

Nancy Abudu: Yes, and I think, maybe, turning to you Safia, I think a lot of eric's comments show that one goal, arguably, is to make sure that people can vote independently, but that the reality, and this perhaps goes beyond those with disabilities, is that voters do need assistance. So, can you talk about Safia, some of the creative and maybe some of the tried and true methods that organizations adopted, especially during the pandemic, to provide that kind of education and assistance.

Safia Malin (she/her): Absolutely, and I would say, well, actually one of the highlights is that, organizing amidst the pandemic is that all sort of, civic rights organizations, and not just those who specifically serve voters with disabilities, an opportunity to examine the methods that we have been using to do more outreach and you know to to do to do our methods to to make sure all the information was accessible. So in addition to just ramping up all of our other activities that we weren't able to do when we're outside, which is phone and texting, holding webinars, you know doing literature drops, it also required us to think outside of the box, so and making sure that when we're having those webinars we're including things like ASL interpreters, that we are doing, you know radio ads and speaking specifically on on the radios, for instance, one of the grassroots connectors holds a weekly radio ad specifically targeted targeted to voters with disabilities, so reaching out and making sure that we're speaking on platforms like that, including interpreters, purchasing billboards and then, and when we were able to get closer to

the election, was making sure that we're getting out in person and making sure that our leaflets or our COMP cards, etc, had the correct information and were you know literate and, and the information that we had on there was was accessible to the to the voters, so it just require for us to take a step back and make sure our methods are accessible, and to ramp up all of that, in short period of time that we had between you know our disastrous June primary and upcoming October election as well. Or November election as well, excuse me.

Nancy Abudu: Sure, please.

Eric Peebles: If I could follow up on that this is, this is this is, what Safia has articulated way is to what, I'm sorry what Shira has articulated is just, is just the idea that an American vote, as as advocates and people with disabilities, with even with people with most even the most complex disabilities, the exercise of the full rights of citizenship, need need need to be protected without fear of coercion or exploitation by others, so to that level, what this means is, and I I talked about this in the context in the performance of several adult roles, with my students and others, is what this means is regardless of what their, regardless of what a person's decision criteria is for making a vote, you know if you deal with, if you've got a person with say, for example, down syndrome or other intellectual disability and they say they want to go for Joe Biden, because Joe Biden reminds them of their grandpa. That's a, that's a really simple decision, simple decision criteria, but nonetheless, this is a decision criteria that resonates with the individual so, so that is just as important as me as me coming back and saying, I want to vote for Joe Biden just because I like the salient points that he made in the debate you know, every, each of those decision criteria are important, because that is what resonates with the individual, regardless of the complexity of the disability.

Nancy Abudu: And that's a great point I mean, one, also you had mentioned Eric the fact that you know a lot of these laws are criminalizing what should be civic participation and actually encouraged by the state, rather than discouraged with again these criminal penalties. But Shira, I wanted to ask you, because of course we know that there are unique challenges when you're living in the south and then in the Deep South, but you represent a national organization, so what would you say were common things that the disability rights community around the country were dealing with, as it came, when it came to balancing voter participation and the serious health risks that they were facing.

Shira Wakschlag: Yeah, so I think I'll talk about some of the work that Arc Georgia did, because I think it's also reflective of the work that some of our chapters around the country have done to support the voting rights of people with disabilities around the country. So understanding that many aspects of voting can be inaccessible to voters with disabilities, the Arc Georgia, and I want to give a shout out to our executive director Stacy Ramirez specifically. So the Arc Georgia was incredibly involved in supporting the disability community in Georgia during the recent General and run-off elections to ensure that the process was as accessible and safe as possible for people with disabilities who experienced a heightened risk of contracting and experiencing complications from COVID 19.

So some of the activities, included, the Arc Georgia ran the Georgia REV UP program, which is a statewide volunteer coalition of advocacy organizations, seeking to protect the rights of people with disabilities. The Arc Georgia also regularly convenes a group of grassroots connectors which Safia has mentioned, and this consists of disability rights advocates from across the state, who support and advocate for voters with disabilities, with a particular focus on supporting black voters with disabilities in rural communities.

During the general and run-off elections, the Arc GA supported voters with disabilities in a myriad of ways, including by coordinating transportation, to the polls and to dropbox locations, providing food and water to voters waiting in long lines, educating voters on the absentee ballot process, assisting voters and receiving and submitting their absentee ballots, engaging in a Get Out the Vote postcard campaign, arranging two virtual presidential election town halls focused on issues relevant to voters with disabilities, organizing a virtual Senate candidate Disability Forum, and engaging in voter registration outreach and assistance.

And these are these kinds of activities are the types of support that a number of our 600 chapters around the country engaged in during the last election season, to help support voters with disabilities, a deal with, you know address any barriers that they experience in the voting process and get the support they need to exercise the right to vote. Though the Arc Georgia and the disability community, both in Georgia and nationwide, would prefer to be celebrating the unprecedented turnout during the recent General and run-off elections, SB 202 means that we have to devote even more resources to educating and assisting voters with disabilities to address the newfound barriers that have been posed that have made it more difficult for all voters, but particularly voters of color and voters with disabilities to access the polls. And that's in Georgia, but you mentioned in the beginning, that there are also a number of laws being, you know, being enacted around the country that restrict voting and other ways and those also harm people with disabilities and our chapters will continue to be devoting resources to supporting voters with disabilities to address those barriers that are being imposed in the process.

Nancy Abudu: And I think that focus on public education is really where we want to put our focus. Litigation is supposed to be the last resort but oftentimes that's where we find ourselves, like in Georgia. However, SPLC, some of you might know, has really tried to invest in non-litigation advocacy strategies and our partnership, through our vote your voice initiative in which the organization has invested up to \$30 million in supporting organizations doing grassroots work, is an example of that. But I'd like to ask Safia and again Shira and for sure Eric your thoughts on what are other tools or maybe better ways that we can use the non-litigation strategies to address these issues. I mean the interesting thing about voting is that there are always elections, we're gearing up for redistricting now, and so these issues will always be relevant and timely. How can we really start to get ahead of this where we don't always have to rely on the Court to do the job or the right thing, so maybe Safia if you can get started.

Safia Malin (she/her): I'll add that I think one thing that's been really successful from my own experience, you know previously, you know before SPLC and then at SPLC, is making sure that the voter education that we're doing and relevant to the communities and tailored to the communities that we're speaking to. So, for instance, our partners, such as the Latino Community Fund and Women Watch Afrika who are long-standing coalition partners and also partners in our SB 202 litigation have included education about SB 202 in their tours around the state educating their populations, about the COVID 19 vaccine, for instance, so making sure that the information is relevant and moving it into something that has you know real world consequences.

So often we hear quite often from voters is you know this has nothing to do with me and I have don't have access and don't have a say in the process anyway, but instead of trying that, especially this legislative session, was encouraging voters, not just to share their, you know their anecdotes about how difficult their experience voting is with us and with our partners, but to testify directly and obviously those opportunities are few and far between as Shira mentioned earlier, but it was important for legislators to her directly from members of you know members of the disability community, members of the Black community, of the immigrant communities, to hear directly from them so, in addition to just building coalition around issues that we all care about including health care access, you know, overcoming the COVID 19 pandemic it's making sure that we're giving our our communities opportunities to channel their energy and the resources in the correct place so either the legislative session, or you know at their local county Board of Elections, for instance, where there you know, with 159 counties and decentralized elections, a lot of this work is happening on the county level, so making sure that people are participating in their own county Board of Elections as well, is one step that we can work to overcome this in our in our communities as well.

Nancy Abudu: Shira, Eric anything to add on that front?

Eric Peebles: I would, I would just make two quick points. I think that, I think that, I think that the point about, the point about grassroots advocacy at the local level, even at the county board who actually, is very important because it's those folks that serve at the county Board of Elections, you know and other local organizations that are the ones that go to church with our folks with disabilities are the ones that belong to the same book clubs or you know social organizations, fraternal organization and things like that, and even, even at the local level that's where impressions can be made, because and my rule of advocacy has always been that that it's hard to tell your neighbor no than it is to tell, tell somebody abstract no you've never met.

And then, just to notes some things that we're doing in Alabama for, for example, our protection and advocacy organization, the Alabama Disability Advocacy Program there's one unit that is specifically dedicated to voter education and has specific line item that are geared towards not only the voter litigation activity, but the voter education activities and as an adjunct to that, the State Independent Living Council in Alabama, has made our priority as part of its three-year plan that is monitored by the feds to include, to focus on voter, voter litigation, I mean voter education, as we head into 2022 and 2024 as this is a three-year plan, so I think even though there is there's new legislation that she has been enacted in Alabama that is very disingenuous to people with disabilities, you know in that of the curbside voting ban, you know, there are advocacy organizations that are still making sure that the issue and the concerns of people with disabilities and their allies remain front and center moving forward.

Nancy Abudu: Well, I wanted to make sure that we have time for Q&A. I've seen some of the questions in the chat but I guess at some point, maybe in terms of strategies, is to remember that the state legislature is not necessarily the last stop in terms of legislation that can protect voters, so maybe Safia and Shira and Eric can talk to us a little bit about the federal legislation that's making its way through the House and the Senate that could address, and maybe even stop in their tracks bills like Georgia senate bill 202.

Safia Malin (she/her): This is Safia, I can start. Our coalition partner shared this helpful tool to understand the difference between HR 1 and S1 and HR 4. HR 1 and S1 is really about, you know, strengthening our election administration and you know HR 4 is really focused on the restoration of the voting rights act and specifically Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act so, in HR 1 and S1, the focus is really on modernizing voter registration, for instance, so requiring that states who don't already offer online voter registration are now offering that, requiring states to implement automatic registration and same-day registration to that folder so that voters have access to, to be able to register to vote.

So, another aspect of it will be restoring the rights of voters with felony conviction, so that they are able to participate in in federal elections, HR 1 and S1 would also make election day a national, federal holidays, so that folks you know working class folks will have the time off to be able to participate on election day and be a part of that process, and that is, you know, is a a tradition and a longstanding American tradition. And as it relates to HR 4, it would really just be you know reworking the coverage formula and what is referred to as pre-clearance is just a fancy term to say you know certain jurisdictions and localities will be required to request you know federal, federal preclearance approval to implement or do any changes to their local elections.

And so, Georgia previously was covered under that entirely and so, it is our belief that HR 1 and S1 and HR 4 would stop things like SB202 in its tracks. We've talked about the issues with drop boxes, the new ID requirements and limits, you know, generally limits to the barrier that individually, both of those bills will be addressing if they were passed by Congress.

Nancy Abudu: Shira, Eric anything to add on the federal legislation?

Shira Wakschlag: Yeah. So the Arc has always fought to protect voting rights in our federal policy work to ensure voting independence accuracy and access, including restoration of the Voting Rights Act and this continues to be a priority in this Congress. Our policy team and working to ensure that any new voting legislation provides full and equal access to voting systems and polling places for voters with disabilities, and does not disenfranchising voters with disabilities, regardless of their guardianship status. The Arc also supports automatic voter registration to increase access for all voters, including voters with disabilities.

Eric Peebles: To get this first there are tremendous pieces in the modernization portion of the proposed legislation that will increase access for individuals with disabilities and specifically those with mobility and or physical impairments, for example, the Disability Voting Rights Act for 2021 will include will include modernizations that allow for electronic submission and, dissemination and submission of absentee ballots, for those of us who cannot physically, those of us with print disabilities who cannot physically manipulate a paper ballot very easily, reducing a barrier and the, you know, there are some, there are some, there's language in the legislation that allows for, or

that mandates that once a request is received by a state management entity, the, the ballot has to be transmitted to the voter within a 45-day period and also, then the states like this, the, the legislation authorizes, The Department of Health and Human Services to provide financial assistance to state entities in order to, in order to comply with the requirements of the Disability Voting Rights Act of 2021. So these are all things that are going to address some of those ADA concerns with overall accessibility, that we discussed earlier so good thing to do. And I, we were talking about efforts of local, local advocacy efforts, that means for those of you in Georgia contact contacting Reverend Warnock contacting Representative Ossoff to state your support for this bill, contacting your, contacting your local Congressman to, to state to state your support for the underlying the importance of these measures for individuals with disabilities.

Nancy Abudu: Thank you. So I wanted to get to some of the questions, our SPLC moderators have been sending some. And one of the first questions has to do with what we address as the “big lie,” I mean all three of you talk about legislation that's necessary to address real issues when it comes to accessing the ballot box, but what do we do with this narrative, that again we've been calling the “big lie,” how do we make sure that we don't add more energy to it, but at the same time don't ignore that it is providing again cover for some of the legislation that we're challenging? I don't know Shira, maybe, what are your thoughts on that and how your organization has been dealing with it?

Shira Wakschlag: I think we just need to focus on the fact that elections should be accessible to everyone and the last election, we see through the numbers was, you know, there was more participation for, for a number of disenfranchised communities, including the disability community and, and voters of color and others, and that needs to be celebrated and we need to do everything we can to replicate, and even increase further those, those numbers of unprecedented participation. So the idea that we need to go backwards and make the process more inaccessible rather than celebrating this victory that we had for civic participation and democracy, I think we just need to focus on those positive points and, and continue to emphasize that and eliminating barriers to accessing the polls.

Nancy Abudu: Another question which I guess I'll pose to Safia, a couple of questions that we've gotten actually center around voter registration and the fact that states sometimes don't do a very good job of voter education is why third-party voter registration groups become so critical and yet laws that criminalize as Eric pointed out assistance to voters so Safia, what are your experiences in terms of how third-party organizations are navigating these confusing waters?

Safia Malin (she/her): Definitely and it certainly poses a challenge it's an added step and, in addition to finding out you're your public education campaigns, there's this added step of making sure that you're always in compliance and making sure your t's and your l's are always crossed, so it makes the process, not only are you deferring resources to your public education that you could have been using on something else, it just it just takes a lot of time and building, trust-building and coalition-building in and of itself is a really time intensive process, so for groups who you know who are already nervous and are serving communities who are marginalized communities, who are working to build trust, it takes the additional time to be able to overcome these hurdles and in places like Florida we're not third-party voter registration groups there's additional requirements, though, on third-party voter registration groups-it just requires additional steps that, you know, voters of color, specifically advocates of color have to pass in order to make sure that their communities are getting the information that they need. So it's an additional barrier, but nonetheless, something that our coalition partners, including ourselves, are working to overcome.

Nancy Abudu: And for the Arc Shira, I mean obviously voter registration is a significant part of the work that you do. How have these laws affected, and I know we talked a little bit about this, but in terms of the organization's concentration on voter registration as opposed to, or, in addition to voter education we, for example, got a question on how are organizations like yours also assisting when it comes to educating about the issues and the candidates on the ballot too?

Shira Wakschlag: Yeah so our chapters around the country as you know, as has been mentioned during this talk there's, it's not just in Georgia, there are other laws around the country that are being enacted are being discussed, that you know in many similar ways they're, they're each different but they in many similar ways restrict access to the polls for voters with disabilities voters of color and our organization, you know, on a federal level, we have noth we have our, our policy priorities to ensure voting access for people with disabilities in Congress, but also on the local and state level our chapters work, you know, around the clock to really fight for the rights of people with disabilities to access the polls and these voting restrictions that are being discussed in passed mean that our chapters are and also our national organization through litigation and policy are really having to focus a lot of their efforts that maybe they would spend on other things - to focus on fighting these discriminatory restrictions and ensuring that people with disabilities and others just the general public are informed about the way that these bills harm people with disabilities and restrict access to the polls, because I think, as you said, Nancy in the beginning that's not always the community necessarily that's at the forefront of these discussions and so it's important to the Arc and other disability organizations that we partner with to make sure that people are aware of disability rights in this process as well, and the way that these laws harm people with disabilities as part of the larger community.

Nancy Abudu: Absolutely. And I guess, as we wrap up the questions that we often get have to do with what can people do. I mean for sure we want to thank all of those who again have joined the session and honestly, for the very generous support of many of you that makes this work, the work that our partners do possible in the first place, but I do believe we have a slide related to calls to, have a call to action and the various things that people can do, and maybe I'll ask, as part of closing remarks from each of you, starting with Safia, what would what would be your tidbit of advice as people, you know that they can take away from this particular conversation?

Safia Malin (she/her): Yeah it's something that both Eric and I discussed earlier is making sure that you're involved at the local level, getting information about when their local Board of Election is meeting, when the state Board of Election is meeting and making sure that those electors are hearing directly from you, so making sure that you have a voice on a local level, but in addition, making sure that you're reaching out to your Senators and your Members of Congress to ensure that they're seeing what's happening on the ground and making, preventing that from happening, happening in the future by passing HR 1, S 1 and HR 4.

In addition, an additional, like mentioned on the slide, we're gearing up for redistricting just you know the redistricting process and after, there's a lot of work to do on that front, a lot of public education, a lot of you know resource things they're meant to do so, get involved with some local civic engagement within your neighborhood in your communities and making sure that your community is having a voice in that process as well.

Nancy Abudu: Thank you. And Eric you gave us already a bunch of great pieces of advice, but what would be maybe the one thing you want to make sure folks take away today.

Eric Peebles: If there's one, if there's one, there's one statement, one sentiment, one idea that you take away from our hard discussion today it is this, voting is important to people with disabilities, because if there is the way that we can participate widely - it doesn't say this vote was casted by Eric the guy in the wheelchair or or Stevie the individual who's blind or John the individual who's Deaf or or or Josh the individual with an intellectual disability. Vote, voting is the one way that we can participate, that is blind. And just remember that every vote looks the same when you're counting them, so it is very important that we protect this one, this one anonymous non-biased aspect of self determination.

Nancy Abudu: Shira, 30 seconds last word?

Shira Wakschlag: Well, you can sign up for action alerts on our website and we'll keep you and keep you in the loop on anything that Arc is doing around federal voting advocacy and policy. You can also sign up for legal updates on our website, and I think just to keep in mind that I think one of you know there's nothing positive about this legislation but one important thing to also keep in mind is you know, the fact that this has brought together such

diverse groups of stakeholders to fight this discrimination and that's important to just continue on with that in in doing this work and continuing to work together to challenge these laws.

Nancy Abudu: Thank you, and again just a sincere thanks to you Shira, Eric and Safia and working in partnership, as you just said here in terms of challenging these laws together. We've tried to provide a number of links and other resources for you all to access in terms of learning more about these issues and what you can do and just again, thank you all so much. But this is not the end there's so much more work to do. There're more bills that are being passed that are regressive so we have to remain vigilant and we look forward to working in partnership with all of you and making sure that our voices are heard and that we fight back against the suppressive efforts. So thank you again for joining, thank you for all of those at SPLC who organized this event, and we look forward to seeing you again soon. Take Care.