

An Open Letter to Corporate Leaders and Lawmakers:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, *"Evil cannot permanently organize. It bears within it seeds of its own destruction."* This belief undergirds our abiding faith in America, even as legislators in Georgia and 39 other states attempt to root our nation in the oppressive weeds of yesterday through a new generation of Jim Crow voting laws. Rather than sowing seeds to provide democracy the greatest chance to grow today and prevail tomorrow, legislators are attempting to transport us back to the shameful period of American history when mass voter suppression for communities of color was the law of the land.

Georgia has a long and tragic history of restricting access to the polls, especially for black and brown voters. Voter suppression is well documented and continues to this day. The national spotlight is on Georgia because of our sordid past. Far too many of our lawmakers failed to take a stand and corporations did not go far enough to ensure every voting citizen had fair and equitable access to the most basic of American rights – the right to participate in the electoral process; the right to have a voice in our shared future. The failure of corporate leaders across our state to live up to their racial equity commitments made in the last year disregards and disrespects our fathers' tireless work and jeopardizes the soul of Georgia and the promise of democracy.

With Rev. CT Vivian and Congressman John Lewis' recent passing, as America experienced a racial reckoning that swept our nation in 2020, the Atlanta civic and business community rallied together and committed to driving systemic change. Words were said. Promises were made. Pledges were promoted. Embracing Atlanta's mantra of *"the city too busy to hate,"* the business community became vocal champions of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Yet, when the first test came challenging our corporations to move from words to action, to stand on behalf of disenfranchised voters, there was shocking silence. Historically, companies' growth and prosperity in Georgia required integration of democracy and free enterprise. The lack of action is not only ethically wrong and morally reprehensible, it hurts the corporate bottom line. Racism is bad for business.

Expanded voting options resulted in more voter participation than in any election in the history of our republic. We proved that when voting access is increased, more people cast ballots. Our country, our democracy, touts voting as an essential measure of civic engagement, and yet when more people voted, the Georgia General Assembly responded by making it harder for people to vote. Under the guise of "restoring voter confidence" and "voting security," legislators passed sweeping laws restricting access to the ballot, especially for black voters. The preamble to Georgia SB-202 passed in the legislature along party lines and signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp, makes it plain that lawmakers give credence to the conspiracy theory that the election was stolen, a lie debunked by 63 lawsuits and investigations by Republican leadership.

The new voter suppression laws are a perversion of truth. Our democracy will be destroyed if we use blunt instruments to appease falsehoods. Advocating equitable voting rights while denying them to others is not equity; it is oppression. These new laws that portends to address voting integrity fail to address the truth of Georgia's long history of excluding people of color from the electorate. It is exclusion by design. In 2021, one week from the 53rd anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King, it is a great tragedy that our country still embraces exclusion and tolerates systemic racism.

We had the opportunity to take a stand and make real progress. This was an opportunity missed.

We are disappointed but not disillusioned. Our faith in America is unwavering. We remain confident that democracy will prevail. We are relying on our corporate community and lawmakers to use their power and influence to protect those most vulnerable to ensure the commitments made for racial equity are not hollow words without meaning. We entreat corporate leaders and legislators to work with us and honor your commitment to building an equitable society by protecting our nation's most fundamental right. Use your power to retire propagandized politics in the state legislatures and promote the passage of HR1 – *For the People Act* and the *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* currently before the Congress.

The most significant threat to our democracy is principled men and women's voices remaining silent on this issue and failing to yield to conscience by standing against laws that restrict access to voting. As Dr. King reminds us, *“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”*

Bernice A. King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Al Vivian, son of Rev. C.T. Vivian

John-Miles Lewis, son of Congressman John Lewis