

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2020

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairman
Committee on Rules and Administration
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Committee on Rules and Administration
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

I am writing to express my concern over Tennessee's reckless voter suppression ahead of the 2020 election. Anti-voter policies—especially policies targeting minority communities—have been a plague in Tennessee, but Secretary of State Tre Hargett's administration of the office has hit a new low during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Requests for absentee ballots in Tennessee for the November election may start on August 5th, two weeks from today. Instead of committing all necessary resources to prepare for a historically difficult election, the state government is fighting against a judge's order that all Tennesseans should have the option to vote by mail. During a public health crisis, voting rights groups have had to sue just to expand absentee ballots and pause in-person requirements for first-time voters. With those cases still pending, the only option first-time voters have is to show up in person to their county's election commission headquarters and show identification. The state does not even publicize this remedy. One judge rebuked Tennessee's election officials for spending weeks disregarding the order to expand absentee voting for every eligible Tennessean, threatening criminal contempt and saying "shame on you."

This obstruction is, unfortunately, par for the course in Tennessee. Under Secretary of State Tre Hargett and Elections Coordinator Mark Goins, voting in the state has plummeted. For years we have been one of the worst states in voter participation. According to one respected study, our voting laws have made us the 3rd hardest state to cast a ballot in the country. Tennessee remains one of the few states where voters have to register a full 30 days before an election.

It wasn't always this way. In 1996, Tennessee was the 10th easiest state to vote. But years of poor leadership have taken their toll. From criminalizing the activities of voter registration groups to creating bureaucratic labyrinths for college students to overcome, Tennessee spares no expense when it comes to stopping people from voting. These officials also go out of the way to suppress voting information, including by indicating that linking to an absentee ballot request from the Secretary of State's website could subject citizens to felony charges. We are now learning that nursing home residents are prohibited from voting absentee in our August 6 primary election. These are some of the most vulnerable citizens at any time, but are especially so during a pandemic. Meanwhile, the state has sat on over \$27 million in Help America Vote Act funds for years, leaving up to \$55 million in federal election funding that could be used on efforts like absentee voting.

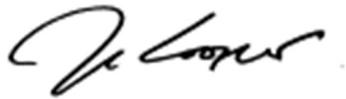
The cost of doing nothing will be borne most by minority communities. Even the conservative Hoover Institution admits, "[t]he hard truth is that there has been a rising tide of voter suppression in recent U.S.

elections. These actions—such as overeager purging of electoral registers and reducing early voting—have the appearance of enforcing abstract principles of electoral integrity but the clear effect (and apparent intent) of disproportionately disenfranchising racial minorities.” Sadly, there is no better example of this trend than Tennessee.

The Committee should ask Secretary Hargett on the record whether he will commit to policies that will save Tennesseans’ lives. For example, how can Secretary Hargett justify not using the funding Congress has appropriated to expand absentee voting this year? How does he plan to mitigate voter confusion as the state continues to litigate against absentee voting weeks before the primary election? How can he justify forcing first-time voters to vote in person during the pandemic? Is Tennessee doing everything it can to ensure Black voters and other marginalized communities can vote during this election? What can Secretary Hargett say to reassure Congress that he is preparing Tennessee’s local election officials to meet the pandemic’s unique challenges and to run a safe and smooth election?

There is still enough time to prepare for this election, but only if Tennessee officials abandon their attempts to stop absentee voting and start taking voter welfare seriously. There should be no more confusion and no more obstruction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Cooper".

Jim Cooper
Member of Congress

cc: Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration