

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Stacey Abrams

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Stacey Abrams, voting rights advocate and former minority leader of Georgia's House of Representatives, where I ask her: How can we shablam on voter suppression? Welcome to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness, I'm so excited for this, our guest, and it's, sometimes, I talk about how it's weird to say excited about, you know, anything in these times. There's so much to keep up with and so much to. Yeah, there's just so much to keep up with and be mad about sometimes. But I'm so excited that our guest is here, so welcome to "Getting Curious," Stacey Abrams. How are you?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:00:51] I am well, thank you so much, Jonathan, for having me.

**JVN** [00:00:54] Well, thank you so much for taking your time to be here, so I guess I just want to quickly preface who you are. If anyone is listening to this, if they have for some reason been li-, living under a rock. Like no shame. But, you know, you know, whatever. So you were famously the first Black woman to run as a majority party gubernatorial nominee in the U.S., which I didn't realize when you ran for Governor in 2018 of Georgia that you were the first Black woman to run as a major gubernatorial party nominee. So congratulations on that feat. But basically due to a lot of systematic voter suppression, Brian Kemp, the opponent who you were running against, won in that election, since then, you have launched an incredible initiative called "Fair Fight" that I cannot wait to talk about. But also, you were in the Georgia House of Representatives from 2007 to '17, which I also just honed in on a lot, thinking about, you know, your time there before this interview because you were in the Georgia House of Representatives in the wave of the Tea Party in 2010. And then you became the House minority leader in 2011 and, until 2017. So I just think that's really, like, very prolific and such experience and that is, for lack of a better word, so cool that you did that. So yeah. I'm done talking now. So now, you know, hopefully everyone understands the level of your just incredibleness. And basically the question is: how are we going to protect our election in 2020? That's really kind of the central thing that I'm thinking of. And that's kind of why I wanted you to come talk to us, because I can't think of a better person to talk to than you. So my-. So, yeah. So welcome. I've never done such a long intro. I'm so sorry. I can't help it. I'm nervous. And I'm just so excited you are here.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:02:52] No no. Never ever apologize to a politician for actually being nice to us. It's, it's unexpected and very kind. Thank you.

**JVN** [00:03:02] So my first question is, like, to you and to kind of everyone, what would like the most well oiled machine or like most, you know, legitimate, so to speak election look like?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:03:15] So the most efficient, effective and well oiled election looks like giving people the opportunity to vote in the way that's most effective for them. That means voting by mail. You don't have to ask for a ballot. They send one to you automatically by virtue of your citizenship and your eligibility. You have it, postage paid. They send you a little booklet that explains who's on the ballot, what's on the ballot, what everything means. They don't tell you what to do. They just make sure you understand what's happening. The same booklet comes to you if you decide you want to vote in person and you are given at least 15 days to vote early. You

can go to any neighborhood center, cast your vote. You don't have to try to figure out which street you live on, on Thursday in order to know where you can go cast your ballot. But you go to these voting centers, you go to a machine, you cast your vote and you're able to be done. Or you go on Election Day, and on Election Day, you show up, it takes no more than 30 minutes to go through the entire process.

And the reason you have to have all three of these things in the best elections is that there's some people for whom voting at home is not, it's not credible, it's not a useful opportunity. If you are disabled and need special machines, if you have language barriers and need to ask questions, if you are homeless and you don't have a place from which to vote from home, if you have been displaced in this moment by COVID or by any economic calamity, you should still be able to go and vote. And if you try to vote by mail and something goes wrong, you should be able to remedy it and not have your vote thrown out. That system would also allow you to register the very day you show up if you need to. If you moved from Mississippi to Alabama, you get to go and vote in person and you just sign up that day, because in America, with the best elections, we have already done automatic registration for every eligible American. So you're just doing new registration to say where you move to. But you're not proving who you are. That's the kind of elections we need to have.

**JVN** [00:05:23] So just to recap that, it's, like, we really need to have a system that makes, whatever system is, is most effective for the voter. So whether it's by mail or in person.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:05:35] Exactly. So, and there are a number of states that have each of these pieces. Some states have all of them. I will say Georgia has some of the pieces. We have early voting in person. We have vote by mail. We have your ability to vote on Election Day. What we don't allow is same-day registration. And while some would claim we have automatic registration, it is not truly automatic for every Georgian. But we do have, we have seen in states across the country flashes of brilliance and moments of utter democracy. And we should be able to claim that no matter where you live in our country.

**JVN** [00:06:11] Ooh, "utter democracy," writing that down to talk about later. So, OK, question. We saw on, just this week and, or last week, I guess, by the time this comes out that, you know, Georgia just had, or had some primary elections. And then I actually put on my Insta stories yesterday, the screenshot of your tweet, because you said, I don't have a clip. I just like went slower. Like I wanted you to repeat what you said. But what was that awesome tweet that you tweeted about the Georgia elections? Do you know the one I'm talking about?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:06:43] I've had a lot to say, but yesterday, so there were two great things. There was one that we had, if you're being partisan, Democrats had the highest single turnout that we have ever had in a primary in Georgia history. I also commented on the fact that the Secretary of State suddenly announced he planned to do his job. And I said, how novel?

**JVN** [00:07:03] Yes and yes. Wait. So what does that mean? Because what did the Secretary of State of Georgia say he was going to? Like, what, what happened that made him say? Because there was like a bunch of inefficient stuff going on and he said he was going to investigate?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:07:17] Well, it's worse than that. So under his leadership, he purchased 107 million dollars worth of machines. The single largest purchase of election machines that we

can find in the world. And he was wholly ineffective in deploying those machines and training people to use the machines. And more than 20 counties in the state of Georgia court had to be asked to extend the time for people to vote because the machines were inoperable, because there was human error. And then you layer that on top of the existing malfeasance of the challenges that he and his predecessor have created for voters of color, where you had lines that lasted up to 8 hours in order for people to cast their ballots. But what he said in response to this absolute calamity of an election was that he had no accountability and no responsibility, apparently having everyone else in the world tell him, "nuh uh." Yesterday, he tweet-, he had a press conference where he announced his intention to ensure that people had an adequate number of places to vote, that the machines work because he was going to train people to use the machines and he was going to do his job and he wanted applause for it. And my response was, "Thank you for agreeing to do the constitutional job you were elected to do that you fought to have." It's the responsibility of the Secretary of State to administer elections and to not only refuse to do your job, but then to try to blame others for your own failures has unfortunately been the course that he has taken. And we are hopeful that by November he will have figured out what his job is.

**JVN** [00:08:51] Well, I think it's interesting because I kind of point to me, to me, so much of the neglect of Republicans on the whole is, goes back to kind of what their original approach to governing was, which was like, you know, small government, like, let's not intrude, you know, air, quote, "intrude" on things. But it's, like, when it comes to administering elections, you can't just not, you can't just look the other way and then scare the shit out of everyone by saying that it's like full of fraud and then just, like, not put polling stations in and not have operable machines and like do everything that we were just talking about. That's a sidebar. I didn't really plan to say that, but it just came out. But they do. It's like when it's convenient for them, they claim small government and then they use a lot of fear. I just noticed that, it's a sidebar.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:09:38] Well.

**JVN** [00:09:38] Whatever. So basically-.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:09:39] But, but, Jonathan, I would like to stay on that for a second because there is a difference between having a nimble government that can be responsive that isn't overblown. That's different than being good at it. And what they have done, unfortunately, over the last 40 years is they tried to turn Americans against the idea of effective administration. And we're seeing that not only in the elections, but in the response to COVID-19. In a well-run country, we wouldn't have the highest infection rate and the highest death rate when we aren't the largest nation in the world. And so I do think your point is very well taken and very important, because it connects not only to the issue of elections. It's a Republican trait to say that we don't need government until we find that government is not working for the very people who need to be served.

**JVN** [00:10:31] The other thing that I just realized about my own issue of my own logic is that Republicans do not like to, you know, spend a budget and 107 million dollars on voting equipment that you then didn't take the time to, you know, make good on that investment by showing people how to actually use the equipment. Because, I mean, I'm, like, do we know when that was purchased?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:10:53] Oh yes.

**JVN** [00:10:53] Was it in?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:10:55] It was purchased.

**JVN** [00:10:55] Was it 2015?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:10:56] No, no, no.

**JVN** [00:10:57] '17?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:10:57] No, he purchased the machines in January. And so we've been ar-. Well. So they approved the purchase of the machines in 2019. They started deploying the machines late last year and early this year. But here, here's your two things for you to think about. One, he not only spent 107 million dollars on these machines, but on Election Day, when there was this free fall of support, we were able to point out that he'd spent 400,000 dollars of federal elections money. Right? Doing a commercial about himself, being such a great Secretary of State, buying these machines, those 400,000 dollars could have been spent on hiring 1600 poll workers, paying them 20 dollars an hour so they could be deployed across the state to actually shorten the lines and ensure that Georgians didn't lose a day's pay. We had people who stood in line for an entire day of work. And in Georgia, you don't get paid up for the time that you take off to vote. They have to let you do it, but they don't have to pay you for it. And instead of congratulating himself on his ineffectiveness, he could have actually done his job.

**JVN** [00:12:07] So basically this most recent Georgia primary did not go well. There was a lot of neglect, mismanagement. But when we go back to-. Well, actually, that's really okay. We we do have to take a quick break, because if I get into that, that's gonna take like 18 minutes. I know it will. So we're gonna take a really quick break. We'll be back with more with Leader Abrams after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Stacey Abrams with us. So basically, we were just talking about how this most recent Georgia primary stacked up to the idea of what an effective and fair election looks like. Bottom line, not, not super great, but some aspects of it were great as far as turnout. But if we go back to your gubernatorial run in 2018, what were the forces at play there that caused the outcome of what happened to happen? Because I know that he, the, the margin of his win was only 50,000 votes. And weren't there more votes that were thrown out than by what he won by and most likely those votes were for you? So, I mean, wasn't there a lot of systematic oppression of votes that caused that seat to go to him? Like, it seems like you won.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:13:24] I, I like that argument. And I think there is ample information to suggest that we at the very least do not know what the outcome should have been. So when I wrote "Our Time is Now," my new book, I begin the conversation by really thinking about what happened in 2018. And one of the challenges was that I was running against the man who was not only the, my opponent in the race, he was the referee. He was also the scorekeeper and the contestant. There is no sport where you would allow the guy you're trying to, you know, it's like letting Tom Brady be the referee at the Super Bowl as well as the scorekeeper. You just, you don't.

**JVN** [00:14:10] And he wasn't. And he still cheated.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:14:13] And to-.

**JVN** [00:14:14] Just saying.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:14:16] It is your show. But that's the challenge. And so what happened to Georgia did not begin in 2018. What started with Brian Kemp, when he became Secretary of State in 2010, one of his first acts was to arrest 12 people, all African American, who had used the legal mechanism of an absentee ballot to win a school board race, and he had them thrown out of their offices. He raided their homes near Christmas. He charged them with 120 felonies. And not a single person was ever convicted of a single crime.

**JVN** [00:14:53] Wait, what?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:14:54] Yes. So it's-.

**JVN** [00:14:55] So in 2010. So in 2010, you're. You are in. It's right before you become the minority leader of the Democrats, obviously in the state house of Georgia. Brian Kemp becomes the Secretary of State and the Tea Party takeover of that midterm election, which happened in 2010. Because I learned from Sister District in a previous episode of "Getting Curious" that we lost, like, a thousand legislative seats in that election. Like when the Tea Party took over. It was just like such, and all those leaders like it just like it stopped so many careers of like Democratic leaders, which, you know, is a whole other thing. But so he did what?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:15:34] So.

**JVN** [00:15:35] So he becomes Secretary of State and then what?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:15:37] So the Governor. So the Secretary of State's office became, the seat became vacant because Karen Handel, another person we can talk about.

**JVN** [00:15:45] Yes.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:15:46] So Karen Handel runs for Congress. She vacates the seat. And instead, you have Brian Kemp, who gets appointed to be the Secretary of State. And one of his first acts as Secretary of State is that he takes a complaint from a few white guys, a white guy and a white woman, actually, and then another guy who complain about these Black people who managed to win an election that they thought they shouldn't win. So state law says that these women had won their seats, that they were duly elected. He instead charges them with 120 felonies. And in the process of charging them with these felonies, they lose their jobs. They lose their reputations. They lose their seats. And after three years, not a single person is convicted of a single crime. That was the beginning of Brian Kemp. So you fast forward by the time our election happens in 2018. He has overseen the purging of 1.4 million voters. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands of whom should not have been removed from the rolls because they weren't dead. They hadn't moved. They should've been allowed to vote. He had overseen the closure of 214 precincts, which, according to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, meant that

between 54 and 85,000 people who should have been able to vote on Election Day, physically could not vote. On top of that-

**JVN** [00:17:07] How did he do that?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:17:08] Oh, hold on.

**JVN** [00:17:09] How did he-?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:17:10] Let me give you the rest. He did a few things. He also masterminded a system called Exact Match that kept 53,000 people from being able to have their registrations processed, 80 percent of whom were people of color, 70 percent of whom were African American. He also oversaw one of the highest rejection rates of absentee ballots and provisional ballots and the longest lines in the country in 2018 were in Georgia for Black folks voting. That was the Secretary of State who won the election and the margin of difference was 54,723 votes. If you're counting.

**JVN** [00:17:45] It's like you came in with all of that.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:17:49] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:17:50] So. So how did he close those precincts? And how did those laws become? Because I know that this isn't specific to Georgia, like these sorts of laws had been enacted in lots of states. But how did he do that? How did he remove those voters and like under what laws? And, and how is able to close all those precincts?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:18:10] And that's exactly the reason for the book. Because the the incredulity that you feel, the surprise and dismay that in our country these things can happen. It's why I want people to understand the architecture of voter suppression. So voter suppression is three things. It's can you register and stay on the rolls? Can you cast a ballot? And does your ballot get counted? And if you're thinking about registration and staying on the rolls in Georgia, in Texas, in Ohio, in Wisconsin, there are laws that let you take people off of the rolls, remove their registration simply because they haven't voted. Not because they're dead, because dead people shouldn't vote. Not because they've moved. You shouldn't get to vote in an election where you're not gonna be affected by the outcome. But simply because they didn't vote. And as I like to point out, I don't go hunting every Saturday, but no one takes my Second Amendment right away for me. How can I lose my right to vote simply because someone chooses not to use it?

**JVN** [00:19:04] Yeah, these "use it or lose it" laws.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:19:06] Exactly.

**JVN** [00:19:07] That, have those ever been challenged in the Supreme Court?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:19:10] They have been. So in Ohio, the, in 2019, there was, there was litigation. It was either '18 or '19. I think it was '19. They challenged Ohio's law, which is similar to Georgia. There are 9 states with these laws on the books and what the Supreme Court said they

didn't actually speak to whether it's constitutional or not. They spoke to whether the notification requirements had been met. And that's part of the problem. We think about voter suppression, like the 1960s, the scenes we saw in "Eyes on the Prize." But today it looks like someone just quietly taking your name off the list, not telling you about it or sending you a postcard that looks like it could have come from Publisher's Clearinghouse. And because you throw it away with the rest of the junk mail, you don't know that you've just thrown away your right to vote in the next election.

**JVN** [00:19:57] Does that go back to like the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and '60 with voting rights and like this, were those laws just, like, not, like, written to deal with, like, the technology of like 2016 and 2018 of like, you know, reaching out via email or like a call or some other way to like? Is that why these like postcards look so old and like not, like, legitimate or something?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:20:17] It's mostly because it's cheap. It's cheap and in the states that tend to use these mechanisms, there isn't a great deal of interest in the people who are getting them actually getting good information. But let-, let's talk. So you have the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which did some things good but was still woefully inadequate. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was actually the, the bedrock of civil rights. And that was, in fact, this week, that was the civil rights law that was used to expand the Civil Rights Act to cover the LGBTQ community. 1965 was the Voting Rights Act because despite the constitutional amendments, the 15th Amendment that gave Black men the right to vote. The 19th Amendment gave white women the right to vote. The 26th Amendment that gave young people at, under, 18 or over the right to vote. It took the civil, it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to give women of color the right to vote, including Black women. But it also was the law that said that you can not preclude people of color from voting. And one of the ways they used to do it was by shutting down where you could go and vote. They made, they put restrictions on who could register. And so, yes, the Voting Rights Act was designed to stop you from being able to block people from getting registered.

So one of the things that happened in Georgia, for example, is there was a, there's a law that Brian Kemp put in place, I mentioned the 53,000 people he, whose voter registration he held hostage. This is what you should think about. Because of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, in 2009, Karen Handel tried to use this rule. It's called Exact Match. Where any, any information about your, your name or information about you that goes into the voting process has to match exactly another document, another database. So Jonathan Van Ness, if they put your name in, if you spell your name V-a-n space N-e-s-s, but when the person typing it up pushes it together, what you would get back from Georgia is a letter saying you have not been successful in registering to vote, but it never tells you why. And so you send back in all your information exactly the same way. And if they make the mistake again, it happens and worse in Georgia, because in the state of Georgia, the Department of Driver Services, our version of DMV, which is one of the databases they use, it does not allow spaces in the last name. So your last name is V-a-n space N-e-s-s, but you will be caught in this constant loop of having your, your application rejected because the database doesn't recognize your name as being yours. And so they accuse you of not actually being able to vote. And they never tell you why.

So the reason I use that example is that in 2009, the Obama administration, using the Voting Rights Act of 1965, told the state of Georgia, do not use this system. It is not going to work. It is going to be discriminatory. Don't do it. Well, in 2013 when the Voting Rights Act gets eviscerated. Guess who decides to use the system? Brian Kemp.

**JVN** [00:23:23] Was that Shelby County vs. Holder?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:23:24] That's exactly it.

**JVN** [00:23:27] So what was that again?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:23:28] So Shelby County vs. Holder is the law, it was basically a lawsuit filed in the state of Alabama because Shelby County was becoming too diverse for their, their nature. They wanted to redraw district lines to reduce the likelihood of people of color being able to elect people who look like them. And when they were blocked, when someone challenged them saying, well, the Voting Rights Act says you cannot do this. They challenged the Voting Rights Act and said, well, we haven't been really, really racist in a long time that you can prove. So this law shouldn't exist. And the Supreme Court agreed.

**JVN** [00:24:02] In 2013? I just, I just feel like we weren't paying attention or something like. I like, ah--And I kind of want to go back to, like, how did we get here? I think, you know, you see Karen Handel, who is a nightmare and I think she's running against Lucy McBath again this year. And like Lucy, we got to, I already donated. Lucy gotta keep that seat. Got to keep it firmly blue. Yes, yes, yes. Vote for Lucy. Sign up. Yes, yes, yes. And then back to what I was saying is that, you know, you have your modern day Karen Handels and Brian Kemps, but really, they are the, they are the result of decades and decades, you know, hundreds of years of really the voting white public's history and like how it was. I mean, this, this constitution was set up historically to protect and give power to property-owning white men and restrict and ignore other people.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:24:57] So let's start with something you said a little earlier. Like, why weren't we paying attention? The system is designed to be so fractured and so complicated that the minute you hear about what happens, each person of good intention and good conscience says, oh my God, why didn't I know? You didn't know because it was designed for you not to know. You didn't, you weren't able to stop it because it was designed for you not stop it. But the most insidious part is it's designed to make you feel responsible instead of holding the people who did it responsible. And so the work I do on voter suppression is to say we need to stop blaming ourselves for what people are doing to us. It's Stockholm syndrome.

We've lived under this for so long. We start to think that we were part of the problem. We're the victims. We are not the perpetrators. To your point, the inception of this country from the very beginning, voter suppression was baked in to our country. Black people weren't human. Native Americans didn't exist. Women needed to be quiet. And only men who own, white men who owned property were worthy of listening to. You go fast forward through all of the horror of Trail of Tears and the theft of land through slavery, through the Chinese Exclusion Act. You go through all of the things that have been done, the, you know, the Spanish, the Mexican-American Civil War, you go through all of those things and you get to a place in the 15th Amendment. That's the first time our nation said, well, maybe we lied about who was really a citizen. So we're gonna do the 15th Amendment and say, if you are a former slave, if you are a person, we're going to let you, if you're a man, we're going to let you vote. And that lasted for a very short period of time because lo and behold, here comes Jim Crow. The Jim Crow laws basically block the application of the 15th Amendment.

And the reason it happened, the reason you said, well, why didn't I know, is that in the United States we can pass every constitutional amendment we want, but the Constitution delegates to the states, the responsibility and the authority to administer elections. So the very people who say you're not human, we don't like you, get out, get to be in charge of who gets to vote. So even if the Constitution says, yes, you can. The state saying, no, you don't. And so you had things like poll taxes and literacy tests.

And let's be clear. Literacy tests actually started in the Northeast because they didn't want white immigrants who weren't from the right countries to be able to vote. But most of it has been focused on and concentrated on Black and brown people. It wasn't until 1924 that Native Americans even became citizens of the United States. Now, think about that. They were here first. 1924 is the first moment they get citizenship. They still don't have the right to vote until the 1960s by and large. And so you get to the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act finds a culmination in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And in that Voting Rights Act, we for the first time put into federal law this belief that, yes, the states administer the elections, but they kind of need some oversight because they don't always do good. And the Voting Rights Act exists for the next 40 plus years. 1975. The Voting Rights Act expanded because while it protected Black and brown people in name in 1965, it wasn't until 1975 that it started to protect Latinos and Native Americans because in states like Arizona, they were using literacy tests and poll taxes to still deny the right to vote.

Then you fast forward again and you get to 2013, actually get to 2008. That's when Barack Obama shocks the world by bringing together a multiracial, multi-ethnic, multigenerational coalition. And all the people who thought their power was permanent got really, really scared. You suddenly start seeing states like North Carolina remove access to early voting. States like Wisconsin, putting new laws in place about who can register voters. Places like Texas, who had already been not great on these things, said you can use your gun license to vote, but you can't use your student I.D. And then you have Florida. Just all the challenges you have in Florida. And Georgia. So you have this progression and this progression has been moving steadily on.

And then in 2013, the Voting Rights Act gets gutted by the Supreme Court in *Shelby vs. Holder*. And when that happens, the acceleration is that now all of these states that have been only held in check, the only gate stopping them from doing all of the suppression they wanted to do was the Voting Rights Act. And now the gates are opened.

And so you start to see all of these laws, 19 million people purged from the rolls over the course of a couple of years. Polling places shut down. All of these things that used to be stopped. And this goes back to your very first question about this. The reason Brian Kemp got away with it was because the law said he could. And that's why at the end of my campaign in 2018, I didn't sue him to make myself Governor, to say, yes, I can prove to you there are this number of people who were denied the right to vote and who probably would have voted for me, because if I'd done that, then the conversation would have been about one politician trying to get a job. I instead said I acknowledged the legal sufficiency, but the laws are wrong. And so that's why we filed suit to change the laws. And that's why the work we have to do on voter suppression shouldn't be about individuals thinking they made mistakes. It should be about changing the laws. Because your first question is the most profound. Our objective as Americans should be to have a system where every eligible voice can be heard and anything that impedes that is wrong.

**JVN** [00:30:26] We're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more Stacey Abrams after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness we have Stacey Abrams with us, so I mean, literally from I remember being very a small child. We are told from such an early age like what democracy is. Our democracy is taught to us as a thing where everyone gets the right to vote, everyone's voice is heard. And that is like the American way. That's like the American dream. That's one of the fabrics that is meant to set us apart from how we think of ourselves better than everyone else is having this fair and free democracy. And that is not how it has been administered and that is baked into our Constitution. I think that some of the things that make that so hard is that the Constitution does leave it to the states.

And when I think about, you know, I've been thinking a lot lately about, you know, white privilege, social capital. And I think about how my grandmother got a scholarship to Duke University in like 1950, when she was one of the first women to do that, but, like, Black people weren't admitted to Duke then. And my grandmother's admittance into that school, met, had her meet my grandfather. Like without that, I would literally not exist, like her opportunities of getting educated at that school, like changed her life, it changed her trajectory.

It literally gave, and her doing that, like, gave me a sense of hope and accomplishment my whole life, because I heard that story when I was like 6 and I was like, oh my gosh, that's something that like, you know, you can do, you could be the first, you could. And that wasn't, like these, this constant disenfranchisement of people, not letting people into school, saying that, you know, people that your, your vote doesn't count. That affects a generational burden like that makes their kids think and it, and it, it, it has ripple effects of generations.

And I agree with every single thing you said, but I do feel like white Americans who don't vote and especially white Americans who vote for, for legislators who enforce these racist rules and ideas that are so much based on privilege and like fear of like, they're literally based on xenophobic and racist ideology. We really need to focus on who we elect to these state legislatures that make these racist ass voting laws, these really fundamentally problematic, like abortion access laws. And I just think that's what's so disappointing is that we're, we're literally based, we're told as children that our voices do count and that this is a democracy that's, that's drilled into us all the time from news, from our families a lot of times, or at least in mine it was. And that is false under a lot of these rules. And when you think about the the lack of truth in the results of these elections in places like Georgia, like we've filmed in Georgia, like I know so many Georgians. Florida, I know so many Floridians. Texas, I live in Texas. That isn't the ideal of America that we are sold and that is fucked up. And white people have been more complicit in that than Black people because of the system itself. So that's just something that came up for me. I feel like I need to fucking say it. And I'm sorry that I cussed in front of you leader Abrams but that that is just what I think about that.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:33:38] When I say we're the victims, what I mean, is that those of us who are unaware as American citizens, those of us who are unaware of how complex our system is, how voter suppression is so effective and insidious, is that it's designed for us not to know. I have a law degree from a pretty good school. I've written an entire book, the first half of which is all about voter suppression. And every day I learn about a new aspect, a new frame, a new way. And the average person does not have time to teach themselves the state laws of elections in 50 places. So one of the challenges is that we have a system that is designed for not only our ignorance, but our confusion. And there is privilege for those who never have to encounter the

barriers because the barriers weren't meant for them. The barriers were meant for the very people you've articulated. The barriers have been targeted at those who don't have the resources, who don't have the privilege, who don't have the access.

But the problem is when you break democracy, you break it for everyone, because on Tuesday, in, in Georgia, when we had our primaries, it wasn't just poor Black communities that couldn't vote. It was wealthy white enclaves, because when you break it, it's broken. The second thing you said was, I think it's some critical, voting is power. That's why it's been so hard to do it. In a democracy, the most fundamental exercise of power is your ability to pick who's in charge. Because we use the term systems. But what we mean are people. And you're absolutely right. We focus so much on the person who occupies the White House. We forget that the person that we pick or the people we pick for the Senate or for the House of Representatives, for the state legislature, for D.A. If you're Ahmaud Arbery, who was murdered in the streets of Brunswick, Georgia, and it took 74 days for anything to happen, it's because the District Attorney that got voted into office decided that your power meant less than her power. And so we have to remember that we are not just running the 2016 election over again in November.

We're also running the 2010 election again, because this is the year where the census decides who gets to have power for the next decade. I spend a whole chapter in "Our Time is Now" talking about the census for exactly that reason, because it's a decade's worth of power. And the last thing I'll say is this. We have a pathway. And the reason I wrote this book was not just to lay out all the challenges, but I spent the second half of the book talking about here's how we fix it, because this is our country. We have hit an inflection point where your voice matters so much. Where the voices of those who typically would have been dismissed from the conversation can finally be heard, to, on this day that we're taping this, DACA, those young people who are dreamers get to remain in our country because this is the only home they've ever known. It's power that makes those decisions and that power belongs to the citizens who wield it. And that's why, despite our anguish, despite our outrage, despite our legitimate just fury with a system that is as racist and as cluttered with ignominy and prejudice as the American system is, we have the power to make it better. And that's what we can do in this election.

**JVN** [00:36:57] OK. So a couple things. Census. This is the first census and we've said it before, but I want to just drill it in. We still have time to file if you haven't yet. I believe you can also do it online for the first time. Also, the census is a separate arm of government. It is not like able--. It's not like, we've talked about that before but I just can't really talk enough about how important the census is, especially because when you think about the power dynamic of what we've been fighting against. The other thing that I wanted to ask about is, you know, President Obama had just said, like, you know, it's protest, it's voting, like, there's so many different avenues to approach this. And then I also saw, I think it was, in Beyoncé's, like, commencement speech address, she was saying how like, you know, if you have a plan like, be about that plan, like don't shit on other people's plan, I'm paraphrasing there, but don't like attack other people's plans, like really be on your plan. And I feel like our system is so cluttered, as you said. You also said this other word. In, what was that? Indig-? What was that word you said? That 20 dollar word that I don't know what it means.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:38:02] I believe, let's see, I either said ignominy or?

**JVN** [00:38:06] Yes. What is that word?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:38:08] Ignominy just means something is horrific and terrible.

**JVN** [00:38:10] Oh, good, great-. I've never heard that word before, that as a great word, so, yeah, that was really good. And so the point is and the question that I'm trying to get to is that sometimes I fear that especially on the left, because we do have-- our coalition is so much more diverse and it has so many more people that have been oppressed and discriminated against. And so there's so many strong opinions and beliefs. But I feel like, you know, a lot of times we get into counterproductive conversations where we're, like, kind of saying similar things. But then, like, we kind of turn on each other and like, you know, like, just turn against each other when we're all trying to get to a more similar place than like what Republicans are trying to do.

And so I guess it just, I wrote down, like, "productive and counterproductive." And how do we, how do we have these conversations, whether it's protesting, whether it's, you know, abolishing the police, investing in community, defunding the police? How do we have these conversations that are so passionate and so important without ripping each other apart to get to the solution that we all want to get to? Which is really you know, we cannot, in my opinion, I don't think that we can really afford four more years of Donald Trump. If, this DACA Supreme Court ruling is great. But we won by one. And if Donald Trump wins four more years, he will get more Supreme Court justices. And I think everything from Roe v. Wade to DACA to gay marriage, all of that will be up for grabs for four more years of Donald Trump.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:39:43] It's OK. I think it's the most reductive way to say, the simplest way to say it is we spend our times fighting over the quality of the crumbs instead of looking at the opportunity of the pot. And so we have such myopic vision because we don't think we get to have the rest of it. We spend so much of our time fighting about the, the, the tiny differences, and sometimes they're meaningful. But we're arguing over the differences instead of arguing over the oppression. I care about voting because I care about people. I grew up poor in Mississippi and I did not like it. And I don't believe anyone should have to endure it. Voting is how we achieve criminal justice reform, reproductive choice, environmental action, economic justice, true public safety, healthcare and all of these things should be things we are fighting for, not fighting about how, but fighting about what and why. And as long as we can be pushed into these internecine debates with each other, we are allowing those who are structuring our demise to go unchecked. I completely agree with you.

The reason I tell people we are not simply redoing 2016, we are doing 2016 and to your point, we're doing 2010 because the census will determine the allocation of 1.5 trillion dollars every year. And if you live in a community where COVID-19, has ravaged your people, you can't get PPE, can't get to a doctor, you can't get a job. That doesn't change, unless we change who's in the presidency. But it also doesn't change unless we change who the Governors are in the 14 states that refused to expand Medicaid. It doesn't change if we don't change the legislatures who are going to draw the maps that govern our lives for the next decade. And if we keep focusing on the narrowness of language as opposed to the fullness of substance, then we are going to lose the war winning a semantic battle that does matter but does not matter as much as the loss of life, the loss of liberty, the loss of democracy. That's what we have to fight for. And that's what I'm working on.

**JVN** [00:41:55] Oh, my God, I think I'm going to cry. That was so good. I don't think a guest has ever made me cry, like literally from, that was really good. So, yeah. That's our time. I mean, that, like literally made me, I'm like fanning my face off. What else do you want to say, leader Abrams?

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:42:19] I want to say, Jonathan, thank you for letting me come talk about "Our Time is Now." Talk about democracy. And thank you for doing what you do to make sure that America can be the country we should be.

**JVN** [00:42:31] Thank you so much for your time.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:42:34] Thank you.

**JVN** [00:42:34] I really can't thank you enough. Thank you.

**STACEY ABRAMS** [00:42:35] It has been my pleasure.

**JVN** [00:42:40] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was voting rights advocate and former minority leader of Georgia's House of Representatives Stacey Abrams. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson.