

## Transcript: Women Power Democracy 2021 Congresswomen Panel

Dr. Turner: Good morning everyone and welcome to the League of Women Voters Women Power Democracy panel. I'm Dr. Deborah Ann Turner, board President of the League of Women Voters. I am delighted to see you with us here at the famed National Press Club and it's exciting to know that many more are watching us via live stream. thanks to all of you for joining us. for those of you joining us virtually we'd love to hear from you. let us know your questions for our panelists by putting them in the Facebook comments or tweeting at LWV with the hashtag Women Power Democracy. you know every time I fly into Washington dc and I see that amazing dc skyline I think one word: democracy. this is where it is cultivated, this is where it's tested, and this is where it's modeled for our nation. and women are powering that democracy. we have so much to be proud of for the last 100 years both in our nation and for the League, but lately we found ourselves on defense again. our country was traumatized and tested last year. now we see threats to democracy all around us. attacks on voting rights, challenges to the election, misinformation repeated, socialized and taken as truth. today's panel is about what women are doing to overcome these threats. we must ensure our democracy is protected and works for all of us. and by all of us I mean not just some women but all women. the woman who just became or the woman who just became an American citizen last week and can't wait to cast her first vote, the woman of color who has struggled for years to register to vote but is determined to have her voice heard, the woman whose district has just been redrawn changing her local representation and threatening the resources for her and her family, and the woman who works three jobs and needs access to an absentee ballot on election day. you see all these women are under attack and it's our job to work for them to fight for them to keep that dream of democracy alive so we can have fair elections, know what our candidates stand for and hold them accountable for the decisions they make on our behalf. when we fight for and protect women we fight for and protect America because Women Power Democracy. as the League's President these are issues near and dear to my heart. as you can see from this panel women in Congress hold these issues dear and understand the tremendous possibility responsibility of their role in our democracy. they are here today because they share that focus and they are prepared to do something about it so we are pleased to be joined today by this powerful panel of Congresswomen to talk about the way women are powering democracy. invitations were extended to members of Congress in all political affiliations and we are honored to be joined by the Representatives with us here today. thank you Congresswomen. we're going to spend the next hour exploring tangible ways that the League, our partners, voting advocates and many others can really embrace explore and live the values of Women Power Democracy. this is not a campaign but a programmatic focus on our work. the landscape has changed as landscapes do over time and we are ready to meet that challenge. we are preparing to step up and meet the moment by battling myths and disinformation. that is our Democracy Truth Project. we are working to expand voter registration especially for those voices of course who have been shut out from important conversations. we call this our expand the franchise initiative. you will see us vigorously defending voting rights across the country. we will never back down from that fight and we are calling this the democracy defense fund and finally we are organizing to ensure fair transparent and equitable representation through the People Powered Fair Maps™ project. therefore, we are tackling these issues from very various angles and we need equal parts of passion strategy and perseverance to see these things through. so, from wherever you are joining us today consider yourself

invited to go on this journey with us now I'd like to introduce to you my friend, partner and moderator of today's panel discussion Virginia Kase Solomón. Virginia has dedicated her career over the last 25 years to fighting for social justice and civil rights which makes her the perfect moderator for this critical conversation. as CEO she leads the League and our members across the country to advocate march protest and at times be arrested to build upon our vision of an inclusive democracy where every person in America every person in America has the ability and opportunity to participate and advocate for issues that matter to them. I'm proud to work alongside her so join me in welcoming Virginia Kase Solomón.

VKS: Thank you Dr. Turner for the introduction and yes I was very glad to get arrested and released very quickly yesterday um as we were fighting to get the President to stand up for voting rights and to move this legislation and prioritize it the way that we know he can and should. and it's just an honor to be with you so thank you so much it is my privilege and honor to introduce this distinguished panel of powerful women legislators. I mean we are so fortunate today to have these incredible leaders here with us and we're here to discuss the ways Women Power Democracy and how women can advance a stronger more Representative American democracy. for this conversation we are joined by four Congresswomen who represent constituencies across the country. from the great state of Alabama first we'd like to welcome Congresswoman Terry Sewell who represents the seventh district which includes such areas as Birmingham, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa and Selma. welcome Representative Sewell and from the

Rep. Sewell: I'm always ready.

VKS: amazing right from the great state of California I'd like you to join me in welcoming Congresswoman Jackie Speer who represents the 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional district located in northern California. we are so happy you could join us Congresswoman. next please welcome Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, another amazing woman who has been a great friend and ally to the League to the panel. Congresswoman Underwood represents Illinois's 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional district which includes suburban areas around Chicago. Welcome.

Rep. Underwood: Thank you.

VKS: and finally last but not least representing the 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional district in the great state of Georgia please welcome Congresswoman Nakima Williams. not only is Congresswoman Williams the first woman to serve as a Representative for this district but she is also doing so in a district held since 1987 by the late great civil rights icon John Lewis. Congresswoman Williams we know that you can only join us for a short period of time um this morning and we appreciate you participating in the panel for the first part of our discussion. thank you so much for being here. so, we're going to get right into it and I'm going to start with you Representative Sewell. since the 2020 election we have seen so many new barriers to voting and continued attacks on our democracy that require deeper investments in the public and private sector. Women Power Democracy is the League's our four-pronged approach to tackling systemic challenges to voting rights through advocacy, litigation, organizing and education and we want these efforts to build more trust in our elections, grow our electorate with equity, create fairness for voter access and ensure that our districting truly reflects our populations. so, I'm curious you know you guys have been working really hard in Congress, in what ways have you and your other colleagues been powering democracy and why are women so important to this right now?

Rep. Sewell: Well first I just want to thank the League for organizing this panel. Women indeed power democracy. Not only are we just a sampling of the women that are in Congress that are doing so but so many women out there on the forefront of organizing and mobilizing their communities are also powering democracy. I'm honored every day to represent my home district. I grew up in Selma, Alabama and so that bridge was uh a portal by which I got to go home and see my mom and dad not just a constant reminder of the sacrifices of John Lewis and so many other freedom fighters for the equal right to vote. I am honored also to carry the seminal piece of legislation HR4 the John Robert Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and I'm proud to say that we in the House of Representatives have already passed it was 219 to 214 thank you very much August 24<sup>th</sup> led by women and it's now sitting on the Senate side. And what HR4 would do it's a complement to HR1 but HR4 is specifically tailored to restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. If you had told me that we would be 56 years later fighting the same fight that John Lewis, Amelia Boynton and others fought 56 years ago for the equal right to vote I would say no way. But all battles have become new again and so while we're no longer counting how many marbles are in a jar modern-day barriers are no less pernicious. Whether it's stopping a person from receiving food or water while they're in line in Georgia to purging roles all across this nation to determining which IDs can be shown in order to get your ballot, people are choosing winners and losers. States are choosing winners and losers and we know that after 2020 ballot the 2020 Presidential election where more Americans voted than ever before all of a sudden now we see over 400 pieces of legislation in 19 states across this uh country actually 38 states across this country have been introduced in state legislatures to make it harder for people to vote and we're seeing women at the forefront of stopping those efforts. Not only are we um just uh thrilled to be on this panel discussion but we know that women often are the ones that are determining who and who we vote for in our families but also how we go about voting and so I just want to encourage the League to continue your efforts to educate to mobilize I think it's really important that you not only advocate but you are willing to litigate you know the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was gutted in 2013 by the Shelby versus Holder decision which found that section 4 of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional and so by invalidating the formula by which Congress decides which jurisdictions have had a history of voter discrimination and therefore section 5 the remedy pre-clearance should be provided for those districts in order for any of their laws or election laws to be to go into effect. It was a prophylactic measure that on the front end we could stop voter discrimination. It's often hard to unring a bell but right now this nation has had no federal oversight so I just want to remind everybody that HR4 the John Robert Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act does just that. It restores the full protections of the Voting Rights Act by coming up with a new modern day formula. We will only look 25 years going forward so 1994 going forward and states or jurisdictions that have had a history of voter discrimination, that's 10 or more adjudicated violations of voter discrimination, would have to pre-clear their election laws and so look we are trying to narrowly tailor this. We know that voting rights is under assault. Not just in Congress but by the Supreme Court. We know that a 6-3 court is looking not only to invalidate HR4 but looking to invalidate the totally the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which includes section 2 the litigation arm which was also under attack and most recently under the Brnovich versus DNC case this summer made it harder for us to bring voter dilution cases and voter denial cases so we have a lot of work to do and I know that not only is a League run by wonderful women but we see LDF legal defense fund led by Sherlin Ifill we see two uh women or three women who are right next to Maryland uh attorney general yeah attorney general Garland helping him lead his way. Benita Gupta, Kristen Clarke and Lisa. So, look we have a lot of great women that are in key places of determination right now more than anything we need your voices

raised to the Senate. we have to get overcome an um a 60 vote filibuster in order to get voting rights on the floor today being considered is the Freedom to Vote Act which is a compromise bill on HR1 which would mean that we would make election day a holiday automatic voter registration all these wonderful access issues that made up the John Lewis empowerment act which I know Nakima carries that bill in Congress. I'm sorry to give a long answer but I think it's really important that you all know the context for which we're fighting and today that Freedom to Vote Act is on the floor and if we don't get the 60 votes to stop cloture i.e., the filibuster it will never come up to a vote let alone HR4 we're now S4 which is introduced by Senator Leahy and Senator Warnock so thank you all and let's mobilize and let's organize and let's get this passed.

VKS: and I know we're going to have to say the f word uh Congresswoman Underwood said to me I said earlier she said she mentioned the f word I said oh we just f-bombed all the time but she was like I wasn't talking about so it goes to show where my mind went right um Congresswoman Williams I'm going to go to you next because we saw record voter turnout in 2020. however, there is still a lot of work to do to continue the trend and increase voter participation especially in the more vulnerable communities and people in communities that have been marginalized just historically yet new threats have emerged in states like Georgia that limit access to the ballot even more. so, I guess my question to you is what do you see as the greatest barrier to not only voter registration but to the ballot box and in particular what do you see as the greatest barrier for underrepresented communities? because we know that Georgia and Texas I think are two of the area the two of the states where we're seeing the greatest challenges right now so I'd love for you to speak a little bit about that.

Rep. Underwood: so first thank you to the League and for everyone here for having us today and for everything that you continue to do to make sure that we are pushing back to save our democracy. this is critical work and I never thought serving in the seat the Congressman John Lewis held that I would still be fighting for the things that he literally was willing to put his life on the line for. so, thank you for being democracy and freedom fighters in 2021 when we shouldn't have to. and when we think about Georgia we played by their rules and we won y'all we won big and that's why they're trying to change the rules. so, we saw what happened in November and people thought it was a fluke. Georgia voters turned out in force and then we showed back up in January and delivered not one but two US Senate seats and then all of a sudden there needed to be rule changes on how Georgians accessed the ballot. so, during the legislative session, we saw a number of bills come up and then we saw corporations standing behind legislators to restrict the right to vote and we quickly mobilized civil rights leaders the Black church movement and other organizations who are willing to stand up in the face of an affront to our democracy. and they started to push back and quickly we saw these corporations change their minds about what was okay and what wasn't okay. in Georgia we literally have a law the books that went into effect July of this year that says you can't even give food and water to people standing in line to vote. and I don't know about y'all but I'm from the south. grew up in Alabama live in Georgia and y'all it gets hot in a summer primary in Georgia. so literally giving water to someone is now a crime. we've introduced a bill for that in Congress because like we have bills for a few things that are sitting waiting for the Senate to take action but what we're seeing is this rolling back of election laws that impact young voters first-time voters and nationally there is a 15% turnout for the youth vote across the country. in Georgia we had a 21% turnout in youth voters and so when we see things that are making it harder for you to get an absentee ballot that make it harder for you to access drop boxes. now in Georgia the law is drop boxes are only available between the hours of nine and five, nine and five! the whole idea of a

drop box is so that you can access it at times that are convenient for you to drop your ballot off but now they're only available between the hours of nine and five and we saw a lot of young voters utilizing that. we had an opportunity to partner with third party organizations where our state wouldn't step in other organizations stepped up like State Farm Arena where the Atlanta Hawks play, they opened up their doors to make it a mass voting site so that anybody could come at any time and it was an experience. we turned voting into a thing in Georgia like you come and you can meet the players, you can vote, you can take a tour of the arena. now that's against the law. we can't even partner with third-party organizations and those are things that they don't tell you about when they're talking about they added access to the ballot. in my home County a Fulton County they're now investigating how to do a state takeover of the Board of Elections which means when Donald Trump called down to Fulton County in December of last year trying to find that exact number of votes 11,000 votes that he needed to win the state, in this instance he could have the Republican influence to just get rid of the board of elections. the local nonpartisan board of elections that is in place to make sure that our elections are secure safe and accurate. now there's a law where you can get rid of them. we have 159 counties in Georgia only one county in the state that they're looking to take over—the one that has Atlanta. the one in Fulton County that I live in. we can't out organize our way out of election subversion and we shouldn't have to but you best believe that we're going to continue to show up we're going to continue to turn out and we're going to make sure that we continue to partner with people because we have to get these voting bills across the finish line. we have to make sure that people understand what's at stake and we're going to continue to do what we need to do. we have our first test against these election laws with the November municipal elections across the state but we're continuing to do the work but it's going to take the legislative work the litigation work and the organizing and advocacy on the ground but we shouldn't have to try to out organize our way out of election subversion because there's just too much at stake. so, I am so proud of my colleague Congresswoman Terry Sewell and what she's done with the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and Terry I mean that's the rallying cry. how do we get this done because states like Georgia would have never been able to pass the law SB202 that they passed had we had pre-clearance in place and they had to go to the department of justice to get permission so we have our work cut out for us but you have some people up here that are willing to put it all on the line for our democracy.

VKS: and Congresswoman Speer just to build on that a little bit. we've seen some really interesting things happening um as well after people are elected into office in California recently. we've been hearing more and more about the weaponization of the recall in California. are you fearful that um we are seeing a trend in that area not just because my understanding is it's not just in the gov- it wasn't just for the governor but there are races all throughout California that now there has been this kind of grassroots movement and I'm just curious if you're seeing anything around that, if you're hearing anything from your constituents that are causing concern for that.

Rep. Speer: Well, thank you Virginia. I'll answer that question, first I'd like to thank the League. I have been a card-carrying member of my local League chapter for many decades so I also want to point out that you know the brand of the League is pure. it's one of the few brands out there right now that is recognized as being uh balanced and interested only in educating the public about voting about elections and I think the more we can get you front and center on issues that have already been underscored the better. I also want to say that what's happened since the 2020 election is nothing short of sinister. the fact that we've had more voters vote than ever before more young people 50 percent of

those between the ages of 18 and 29 voted uh in the election record numbers um and then quickly we saw some 19 states pass state laws to restrict but here's the good news the laws that were passed were in states like Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Arkansas, Wyoming, Iowa and Montana. the voting rights lab actually shows that more laws were passed to extend voting rights than to restrict them. it was just in those particular states. so, in California for instance a bill just got signed into law that makes it a requirement that for every election a ballot be mailed to every voter whether they decide to vote by mail or vote in person is their option but it's going to be an all-mail voting opportunity in the state. now to your question about recalls in California have been around since the early 1900s. it was part of the populist movement to get rid of the railroad tycoons so we've lived with it forever and the most governors have been there has been an attempt to recall them. there's only one governor that was actually recalled. it was Governor Gray Davis when I was in the state legislature and we got none other than Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in lieu of governor Davis so in terms of local recalls yes they do occur they could be weaponized to the extent that in the case of Governor Newsom, it was the Republicans uh way of trying to undo the election that had taken place two years before and they failed miserably. I mean he trounced the recall. so can it be weaponized of course it can be weaponized but it's been something that we in California have lived with for a very long time.

VKS: And I think that's the thing that we're so fearful of right now for so many people is that people win elections and then others are trying to reverse those results by any means necessary and so I think one of the concerns that we have at the League and we're just really curious on how you all are dealing with this because everything can't be legislated away so to speak right and so there's a role for the public and so I guess that's why I'd love to come to you Congresswoman Underwood because our job at the League, we work to protect voting rights and advance a more equitable democracy through our advocacy and voter protection efforts. so, in your opinion what is the greatest opportunity for expanding voting rights today and how can the public support legislation like the Freedom to Vote Act how can anybody who's watching on Facebook right now what can they do?

Rep. Underwood: Well, thank you for this timely conversation. it's timely because today the Senate will be taking up the Freedom to Vote Act. now as Congresswoman Sewell outlined this is the compromise legislation that Senator Manchin and Senator Warnock and another small subset of Senate Democrats pulled together in order to get Republican votes because in the Senate voting rights legislation has to reach basically a super majority a 60 vote threshold otherwise it will be filibustered. that was the f word I was talking about and so let's just be very clear because we've had a lot of policy conversations of late when talking about the Senate where we don't have unanimous support among the Democrats. we have 50 votes for voting rights that could pass today. literally it could pass today and we could have the Vice President come in right so you would get that actual majority to break the tie. however, the filibuster stands in the way of voting rights. not tomorrow next week but literally today so I know we have a lot of folks in our viewing audience and my request to you is to pick up the phone today's not the day to send the email I talk a lot about writing a letter and putting a stamp on it today is not the day to do that today is the day to pick up the phone and to call your Senator. I don't care who your Senator is call them. call them and say we need you to support the Freedom to Vote Act and ask them can you count on their support. ask flat out and the person on the phone may him and haw ask for your name instead nope you want the answer. okay you want the answer and if the answer is not satisfactory then feel free ladies to share your opinion okay because here's why: they need to hear from you. a lot of folks think that they can do this damage and kill our democracy in the dark. we have a lot of folks that don't go home on the

weekend a lot of folks that don't have public events a lot of folks who think that they are almighty and have the opportunity to dictate the future of this republic and our democracy and that they can do their dirty work in the dark and what we are going to say is not on our watch. yeah okay and so today's vote is critical. I know that the League has been having your White House Wednesdays and you have been doing all this fabulous work to mobilize and engage and call on every leader in our democracy to do their part to the fullest extent of their authority. part of that responsibility will be to have a tough conversation about the filibuster. my thought and everybody on this panel may not agree so I just want to be very clear about this but my thought is the average American doesn't care about procedure. the average American wants to see us get things done and the average American understands what it means when we limit their core civil rights when we restrict when we call back we'll make it more difficult to participate in our democracy and the average American's not having it. they're disappointed and guess who they will take that disappointment out on? all of us. all of us. therefore, I just want to affirmatively state to my constituents to the 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional district who I know are watching because we have very robust League participation in northern Illinois that um ladies we are fighting hard for our voting rights and we look forward to having the opportunity to consider the Freedom to Vote Act once the Senate gets it together and sends it over our way. but please call your Senators today yes even if you're from a blight bright blue state the matter call them and let them know our expectations around voting rights and access to the ballot box.

VKS: Thank you I will say that it's interesting because what we've heard back from our nearly 500,000 members and supporters in 765 communities across the country that people generalize and say Congress isn't doing anything and our members will say well wait the house is passing a lot of legislation what's going on with the Senate so I appreciate it.

Rep. Underwood: We're led by a woman.

VKS: Well, there you go! what a difference it makes. isn't that right, I'm telling you. um so I think there is a lot of frustration with the Senate right now and there's another um I think frustration um Congresswoman Speer that I want to direct to see if you can help um maybe help folks understand and it really is on the threat of mis- and disinformation. what I like to call lies. whether they are intentional or not but we saw in the 2020 election and it continues to deceive voters and it really is endangering our democratic institutions. the League, we have a program called the Democracy Truth Project and we want to counter mis- and disinformation and advance better public understanding of the democratic and electoral process because there we know that elections administration poll workers people are feeling threatened right now. they're afraid to do their job and many of these jobs are volunteer jobs held by seniors and other folks who are really committed to just making sure that our elections are working properly. so in your view what can people do to best counter the spread of misinformation about voting elections and how can we build back trust in our democratic process and I'm actually going to pass this to all of you because I think this building back trust piece is really hard when you know something as something that people generally trusted has now been you know I keep using this word weaponized um but it's really frightening for so many of us and so I'm wondering how what can we do about it?

Rep. Speer: so it is truly profound that you can have someone as the former President say a lie say it over and over again and people will begin to believe it the majority of Republicans believe that there was excessive fraud in the 2020 election even though there have been audits and audits and re-audits

that have taken place in states like Georgia and Arizona that have proven frankly more often than not that Biden got more votes not less votes than were actually tabulated. so, um the disinformation is real and it is fueled by two of my constituent companies Facebook and YouTube and one of the horrific issues that occurred during the 2020 election was the use of social media and particularly Facebook to demonize women who were running for office. once Vice President Harris was nominated by then candidate Biden as his Vice Presidential nominee I called on Facebook to be alert to the fact that there would be a vigorous effort to demean Vice President Harris as a candidate and the Wilson Center here in Washington did a study of 13 women candidates, Republicans and Democrats across the country, and they saw that more democratic women were being demonized than Republican women. um but the person that got 78% of the demonization was candidate then uh Vice President Harris and much of it was sexually oriented. so, I reached out to Facebook had a conversation with Cheryl who and then we actually provided them with 20 examples of this kind of victimization and demonization that was taking place and they were grotesque and we showed them to her and her staff and she says these are and they violated every one of their principles in their use agreements. they violated them. she admitted to that and yet her answer to me was "well bring us more and we will take them down." now I believe they have the ability to change their algorithms. they have the ability to shut these down and they chose not to so I think our role really is to call upon the social media companies to be more responsive. they need to be required by law to be fined by law if they do not take the steps necessary to make sure that those that utilize their sites comply with their use agreements. so, it is going to continue to be I think a serious problem. we saw in the 2016 election when Russia used it very effectively to uh sow discontent and create a lot of disinformation so those are the tools now that are being used and we have got to recognize our obligation in Congress to regulate them much more vigorously.

VKS: thank you I think that that's something that we all recognize and I also don't want to diminish the role that race plays in social media and um the fear of a Black and brown electorate and leadership and so um Congresswoman Williams I'm curious you know after Congressman Lewis passed away you took on his very important role but we saw this with Stacey Abrams when she was running for governor. we've seen real backlash against women of color candidates and the mis- and disinformation there and so I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to that as well and outside of social media, are there other opportunities to um get accurate information especially when there's this backlash on telling the accuracy of American history now even in schools you know how do we how do we do it?

Rep. Williams: So, first I think we have to recognize the role that we can all play in this. not just the companies but when you when your auntie sends you that article or shares that article that you know doesn't quite sit right and you know it's inaccurate like let auntie know that this this isn't right this isn't factual and help to fact check things on your own before you share them. you'll see the headlines and sometimes we will share things that we don't really want to be out in the ecosystem so make sure that we're doing our part on that but when we think back to the 2018 election we also have to check ourselves because we have to change as we're changing the face of who is in leadership in this country. we have to be comfortable with people who do not look like the norm. when you look at all of the Vice Presidents in this country none of them have looked like Kamala Harris and so this was a lesson that we had to teach people who sometimes were well-meaning on what leadership looks like in this country and so pushing back and changing the narrative in that regard and just two weeks ago we have a candidate who's running for lieutenant governor in Georgia. he's currently a state Senator in leadership and he had this someone asked him about the election and what was happening and Georgia changing



and he talked about all of these people that don't think like him or don't think like Georgians moving into the state and so I sometimes I can get a little smart mouthy y'all so I was like well I was born in Columbus Georgia and I don't think like you sir and we don't and he said "we need people who are coming to our state to assimilate" and so what that means is he wants this groupthink and everybody to think the same way and to continue what Georgia looked like in the good old days. and so, we have to push back against those narratives on maybe we don't want what happened during we had four dark years in this country but y'all there are some dark times before that as well that we have to make sure that we are moving forward in this country and that means changing what leadership looks like. changing our narrative on who we can see in these positions and how comfortable we are in pushing back a thing things like this lieutenant governor candidate saying that people coming in not thinking like Georgians and needing to assimilate because we need to get back to the good old days. and my friend Stacey Abrams has not announced what her plans are for next year but if I have it my way we will have a Black woman at the top of the ticket in Georgia and we will have an opportunity for you all to chime in to help us change what the face of leadership looks like in Georgia. if we can do it in the deep south we can do it anywhere in this country so it's going to be up to all of us to make sure that we are pushing back because it's going to come. whether she just yesterday when you got arrested my friend state Representative Bee Nguyen was in town and Bee got arrested and Bee is the first Vietnamese American elected to the state legislature in Georgia. and we won't talk about her other plans because this is a non-partisan event but Bee is standing on the front lines for democracy and some of the attacks that she faces because there hasn't been anyone that looks like her before in this position. so, we have to do our part in making sure that we're pushing back and changing the narrative and changing what the face of leadership can and will look like in this country. look at this panel today. Lauren your district people thought that you could have never represented this district because this is not the typical district that a Black candidate runs in but Lauren is here, Congresswoman Underwood is here representing the people in Illinois 14th Congressional district and so this is what it's all about building multi-racial coalitions being willing to put yourselves out there and push back against these narratives because we all have a circle of influence so it's up to us.

VKS: Thank you so much and um I'm getting my one minute card but I want to continue this a little bit longer and I'd love for both of you to answer as well you know on ways that you're trying to combat and I would say outside of social media right because I mean even just around we've seen the vaccine politicized we've seen like so many things where people are just getting really bad information and it's not just any one demographic. with the vaccine we saw you know that even Nicki Minaj right who was getting bad information so we have you know it's just it's across the board though. and I'm not trying to demonize her I'm just saying it's so easy for people to be able to get that information and continue to spread it and so how do we combat that because our elections um people just got such horrible information and we do have a midterm coming up we have a primary coming in just a few months and so how do we how do we do that?

Rep. Underwood: okay so let's talk about I'll say it like this I think in Black families healthcare information typically flows through the maternal figure right? mom or grandma says go get vaccinated, go get your checkup, go get your breast exam, go get your shots and you know she might remind you strongly a few times and then you go and do it. COVID was a little different in that the information and the health care decisions kind of flowed through a different pathway. I think with elections and with voting we know even outside of the Black community that many households it's mom who's

encouraging you to register to vote she might even take you to register to vote for the first time that might be a bonding opportunity. mom is reminding you to fill out that absentee ballot while you're in college. mom is reminding you to participate in our democracy. the role of women and our families in making sure that we're healthy making sure that our country is healthy is one that is unmatched. the ladies are the one that's keeping us together literally okay and so when I think about disinformation and the way that that flows they have manipulated these familial and relational ties where the recommendations now are being tainted because now that maternal figure, maybe mom maybe auntie maybe grandma, is spreading some misinformation. my recommendation to folks that are watching is to be proactive. assume that this is happening in your family, assume that is happening on your block, assume that it's happening in your neighborhood and be forceful and proactive with the facts no matter if it's electoral facts or if it's COVID related facts. right like we have the opportunity to shape culture to shape narrative and to set the baseline understanding of those that are in our networks in our spheres and I am encouraging you to take full advantage of that opportunity. the last thing I'll say is this in 2020 we taught people how to vote in my community we taught them how to vote by mail, we taught them how to vote early and we taught them how to use the drop boxes and because we took the time and spent the resources teaching our community how to vote in a pandemic environment we had the highest voter turnout ever in the 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional district of Illinois ever. okay it should not be our responsibility as individuals to teach people how to vote, shouldn't be our responsibility to out organize restrictive voting laws. however, if we have to do it we got to show up and do it. we cannot just hide and run away from that responsibility because we don't like it. we have the opportunity to make it clear for our folks what the rules are, how to navigate this process and I'm going to encourage you to educate yourself. right go to the League's website, go to your state and find out what the rules around voting are in your state and then make it your business over the next year to educate your community on how they can vote. we're going to try to make sure that we have the most expansive voting laws and you know the most accessible voting opportunities in this country but we need you to go out and make sure that everyone in your community knows how to participate.

VKS: Thank you. Congresswoman Sewell do you have anything to add?

Rep. Sewell: No, these ladies are...

VKS: So, what I'm going to do then is move on to another question. so, we have a campaign that we started. we lost a supreme court case in north Carolina a few years ago um the Russo case and so it was you know we were trying to figure out how much was too much when it came to partisan gerrymandering and the court declined to address that. um and so we have a campaign called the People Powered Fair Maps™ campaign that we launched immediately afterwards and the League has been working to ensure that redistricting is focused on creating fair political maps in all 50 states and the district. so, from your vantage point how can policymakers and the public drive the creation of fair transparent people powered maps and eliminate partisan and racial gerrymandering during the ongoing redistricting process? I mean we're in it right now and we know that the Freedom to Vote Act would help to eliminate this but we've lost so many protections with the Voting Rights Act we've seen and we've seen terrible maps already introduced so how can folks engage in this process now?

Rep. Sewell: Well that's a great question but I have to tell you this is the first time that we're experiencing redistricting without the full protections the Voting Rights Act and what's scary about this is that states that have had a history of voter discrimination and should be watched or over oversight

should be provided are the very states that “hands-off because we don't have any federal oversight” and I think that if there's a central theme here it is that we have to take ownership of our own democracy and our own part that we play in that democracy. voting is the single most important thing you can do. the fact that we have state legislatures that would want to put racial gerrymandering and partisan gerrymandering into play is the product of the fact that we didn't go to the polls and vote for people who would actually change that narrative right and actually do their own. so, you have to as Lauren said know what your laws are now educate your community to go to the polls now know that we are then elect people who will actually do the right thing and be fair-minded in their drawing of maps and all that stuff that's all the way down the line so every election rain, shine, snow, sleet, state, federal, local they're so important. they're critically important and I don't know how you can get that across to folks who sometimes think that elections don't matter. I love to use Georgia as an example I mean elections matter your vote mattered. it changed who is our President. it gave Georgia an opportunity to have two democratic Senators in 2021. voting matters and look I think that um and the court systems are where we're going to have most of the challenges frankly around redistricting um so many states don't have what I mean you know some people have these independent voting commissions that redistributing commissions like California you know maybe Jackie could speak to that. Alabama we vote from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on a Tuesday. we have no early voting, you have to have an excuse to absentee, and the reality is while some of the bluer states are getting really very creative in figuring out ways to give better access to the ballot box. unless we have across this nation an opportunity for people in Georgia and Alabama and Texas and Florida we're going to continually have the same problem and so you know people don't want federal oversight but I look at my state and I know that we would not, but for the federal court system, wouldn't have civil rights and voting rights and human rights and so thank god for federal oversight and what we're saying is not every state but the states that are most egregious, that have had a history of adjudicated, we're not talking about hearsay, adjudicated violations. and I want you to know in 2021 a look back year of 25 years and or 10 more violations, there are over 10 states that would actually be in that you know opted in to having to pre-clear and that's all you need to know in terms of why it's important to have federal oversight right. and so, I just think you know um I don't know I get a little I wonder why I mean I would ask John often like because you it's like you're hitting your head up against a wall sometimes it's very frustrating. but he would look at me and he would say but progress is worth it right and if we who don't believe don't educate and don't mobilize and don't get folks involved who's going to do it? we're the change we're looking for so let's mobilize our communities let's educate our communities and let's be at these hearings. every state that has to draw a line, has to have notification and transparency show up at these redistricting hearings make your voices heard especially in states where you know they're not looking to hear from people that politicians want to choose their own districts and not the other way around of the electorate choosing their elected officials. you got to show up and show out.

Rep. Speer: Can I just add one other point? you know no one is going to welcome having power taken away from them and right now it's in the power of all the state legislatures. I was in the California state legislature for two redistrictings it was all about retaining the status quo so that those in power both Republicans and Democrats would have the same numbers. Californian initiative was taken up to create the citizens commission frankly um many were opposed to it and fought against it because they wanted to retain the power. even people here in Washington. now it passed, nonetheless. we're living with it now. it's working well. this is the one issue that however you poll wherever you poll everyone thinks that gerrymandering is wrong. Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals. if the League

took this up as their number one issue and drove it that frankly is the only way I think it's going to happen. it's not going to happen through efforts in the state. it's not going to happen through the federal government. it's not going to happen through Congress so at least not in the near term but it really is the seminal issue in terms of fairness and one that I think the League would be really poised to do something about

VKS: thank you all so much. I know that we have started to run out of time and so I want to ask you all a question um before you go because I think we want to end on a high note so Congresswoman Williams we'll start with you and work our way down. um we hear a lot of negative what gives you hope right now?

Rep. Williams: What gives me hope um well number one saying those election results in Georgia last year I know what's possible but I have a six-year-old son my Carter Cakes and Carter pays attention to everything and is soaking it all up and y'all elections are about the future and Carter is the future of this country and we owe it to him to get this right. just this week he started his own little advocacy campaign and um called his school board member because he doesn't get recess. he said, "mommy I want to be an after-schooler because they get to go outside and play for 15 minutes but I don't" and so we got his school board member on the phone and then the superintendent chimed in. so it gives me hope is the future of this country and people like Carter who would who are literally taking things like recess in their own hands but will one day be in charge of this country and all of this work that we're doing will be worth it.

VKS: Oh, I love that. hey Carter Cakes.

Rep. Speer: How do you how do you um upstage Carter Cakes? I don't think you can but you know two of the members on this panel are you know new freshmen and sophomore and they have the power to articulate what needs to change. so, to follow up on Nakima. I had a youth advisory board that I just created, just had the session with them day before yesterday. the talent in our young people is mind-blowing and the issues that we're having such a struggle to grapple with whether it's climate change, gay marriage, universal service in the military, they get it. they get it and they're poised to change the way this country operates so I guess what gives me hope is that there's a uh the post-millennials are ready and they're going to run and if we get younger people running and getting elected we're going to see a transformation in Congress.

Rep. Underwood: Thank you so much yes what gives me hope is just women's leadership across this country. women are running and winning in elections from school board and County board to Congress to the White House and I am just delighted to be able to serve with these incredible women in our Congress and drive progress forward.

Rep. Sewell: Thank you. what gives me hope is really when you think about how resilient this nation is and the fact that democracy, we're in search of a more perfect union but when I think about the fact that we get to serve in Congress and our foremothers did not that's right uh and the fact that really smart and talented people who were immigrants you know come to this country and they give of themselves and they give of and so what gives me hope is our democracy. and yes our democracy is under threat but I have to say the fundamental foundation of who we are as Americans at the end of the day? I'm betting with us. I'm betting with us and so it's the future it's the leadership of women. it's our

young people, um but it's also fundamentally who we are as Americans winning out ultimately an equitable fair you know struggle towards a more perfect union.

VKS: Well, I want to thank you all um you know you all are doing just such incredible work in Congress. we really are humbled for that you gave us your time today and grateful for your service. we know after January 6<sup>th</sup> that in particular many of you were targeted specifically and the duties that you perform. you didn't have to run. we know that there are always people who are going to come after you there are people who are going to have horrible things to say and really challenge you not only as women but for many of you as women of color in particular. and so, we are just grateful for your courage and your leadership and um it really is an honor to be able to have you all here with us today so thank you and I'm going to pass it back over to Dr. Turner to close us out.

Dr. Turner: Thank you Virginia. I knew we were going to cover a lot of ground today but wow you guys you knocked it out of the park. I am totally honored to be here with you I'd like to thank you panelists for being here and contributing to this really important conversation. we are so appreciative of your time your insights and your willingness to tackle these issues with us thank you for your candor and your service to your districts. they are fortunate to have you as Representatives and I also like to thank our generous supporters whose gifts to the League make our work possible and to thank the League of Women Voters staff who never ever quit. I am truly inspired by the creativity and dedication you all staff bring to this work and for making today possible. it was not a small undertaking and I'd like to stand a special thank you to the National Press Club staff who met our every need. we are grateful for friends like you and you have been a great partner to the LWV staff. finally thank you to those who joined us today, whether you trekked to 14th street or watch the livestream, your engagement with this event reinforces for us that there are people willing to stand up against disinformation, help people gain and maintain access to the ballot, ensure fair maps and keep our democratic values alive. we have heard a lot to reflect on today and I want you to leave knowing there's always something you can do to empower voters and defend democracy. every year is an election year and most communities have important local elections coming up next month. invite others to visit our [VOTE411.org](http://VOTE411.org) and learn about all the important election resources that they can provide there. recruit friends to be poll workers with you in your next election. join your local League of Women Voters or join them at least in registering votes folks to vote. all year long redistricting screening is happening right now. in your state, make a public statement about the maps being drawn where you live and have a say in how you are represented. there are so many important ways to defend our democracy and I hope you each will find one activity that helps become impactful for you your family and your community. finally, I invite you all to visit the League website at [LWV.org](http://LWV.org) to keep up with what we're doing under the Women Power Democracy banner. women have a long track record of success when we work together now like in so many other difficult times in our country and in our history, we can make a difference so let's get out there and do it and thank you all for being here. thank you.