



THE CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY FOUNDATION PRESENTS

DREAM BIG:

PROTECTING DEMOCRACY
BY DEFENDING THE VOTE

OCTOBER 29, 2019

INSIGHTS FROM THE PROGRAM

We have built an essentially unrepresentative representative democracy.

– Lawrence Lessig

The dismal history and current state of voter suppression in the U.S. stirred panelists and community members at the Cambridge Public Library Foundation’s recent DREAM BIG event. **Rachael V. Cobb**, Professor at Suffolk University and board member at MassVOTE, moderated a spirited, insightful discussion with historian and author **Carol Anderson**, Professor at Emory University, and **Lawrence Lessig**, Professor at Harvard Law School, political activist, and author.

Anderson framed the long trajectory of voter suppression in the U.S. which includes not only familiar incidents “like the violence that rained down in Selma,” but also insidious and persistent “bureaucratic violence...that is absolutely destructive to democracy.”

Underscoring the perennial racism in voter suppression, she pointed to the Mississippi Plan of 1890. In response to the 15th Amendment, the state used the societally-imposed conditions of black people—poverty and illiteracy—to disenfranchise them with poll taxes and literacy tests. It took 75 years, a massive civil rights movement, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act to begin to reverse the voter suppression of the Jim Crow era.



The Voting Rights Act stood firm until 2013 when, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court struck down a section determining which states require pre-clearance for voting laws based on their history of discrimination. Then, states dominated by an increasingly right-wing Republican Party—at odds with an increasingly diverse America—sought to deter voters unlikely to support Republicans. Officials closed polling places, required photo IDs while eliminating license bureaus in black belt counties, disallowed public housing IDs, and erected other obstacles to voting.

The ignominious history of voter suppression in our nation makes the case for Anderson’s assertion that “politicians elected by a massively disfranchised electorate...determine the laws of this land based on destroying the right to vote.”

Examining the broader context for this issue today, Lessig flagged three key challenges. With our Electoral College system, “it’s not America elects the President,



it's swing state America elects the President.” Most states require all their electors to vote for the candidate who carried the state, even if only by one vote. So politicians campaign, spend, and legislate with eyes on a few swing states which—with older, whiter populations, and 19th century industries—are not representative of America now.

Pervasive gerrymandering in our nation means the politicians draw districts to select voters, rather than voters selecting the politicians. Finally, with our system of private funding for campaigns, candidates are essentially chosen by approximately 150,000 wealthy Americans; and “we vote among the people who have made the moneyed class happy.”

Asked how we proceed from here, the panelists urged grassroots efforts. Anderson pointed out that Roy Moore was defeated in the 2017 Alabama election because “civil society rose up and did the heavy lifting of democracy...going door-to-door.” Lessig saluted a young woman who spearheaded a Michigan ballot measure to counter gerrymandering, which won with over 58% of the vote. We can unleash enormous energy if we get people to think about fixing democracy “not as a Republican or Democrat, but as a citizen first,” he asserted.

Many strategies—automatic voter registration, home voting, public funding for Congressional elections, etc.—would improve our system. But a top priority now is public awareness of the 2020 candidates who are committed to fundamental reform.

Library Director Maria McCauley declared her hope that “you will leave the program inspired to help protect the right to vote for all citizens.” With your support, the Library will continue to inspire and thrive as “a place where democracy is protected, where everyone has access, and where rights are respected.”



A video recording of DREAM BIG: Protecting Democracy by
Defending the Vote can be viewed on our website: www.CPLFound.org



TAKE ACTION!

Now more than ever, the issues discussed in **DREAM BIG 2019** demand our attention and action. Please consider supporting these organizations working locally and nationwide on issues impacting voter disenfranchisement:

MassVote (www.massvote.org) | **The League of Women Voters** (www.lwv.org)

Common Cause Massachusetts (www.commoncause.org/massachusetts)

ACLU (www.aclu.org) | **Voter Protection Project** (www.protectvoting.org)

Interested in learning more about the history of voter suppression? Check out one of these books from the Cambridge Public Library:

- *One Person, No Vote* by Carol Anderson
- *They Don't Represent Us* by Lawrence Lessig
- *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* by Ari Berman
- *"The Right to Vote* by Alexander Keyssar
- *The Voting Wars: From Florida 2000 to the Next Election Meltdown* by Richard L. Hasen

CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Shippen Page, *President* | Katie Lapp, *Treasurer* | David Sandberg, *Secretary*

Ed Belove | Jill Burrows | Kay Calvert | Cathy Chute | Donna Davis

Amy Domini | Kate Flaim | Susan Flannery | Lauren Holleran | Debbie Porter

Betsy Rudnick | Stan Twarog | Janet Axelrod, *ex officio* | Maria McCauley, *ex officio*

Cambridge Public Library Foundation | 449 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138

857-235-9278 | www.cplfound.org

Katie Welch, *Director* | katie@cplfound.org