

# THE PATH TO VICTORY IN THE DEEP SOUTH RUNS THROUGH TENNESSEE

BY CHARLANE OLIVER, CO-FOUNDER, THE EQUITY ALLIANCE AND CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE EQUITY ALLIANCE AND THE EQUITY ALLIANCE FUND

---

**“Pundits will have us believing that the Deep South is a foregone cause of red states, but the organizing power of Black women in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama tells a different story.”**

Tennessee is one of a few southern states exempted from the Section 5 preclearance requirement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which has allowed the state to fly under the radar and slowly erode our democracy. A lack of investment in the past 20 years from national progressive donors and institutions has opened the door for conservatives to gain partisan control of the Tennessee General Assembly and have a trifecta supermajority since 2010. Strict voter ID requirements, archaic 30-day voter registration deadlines, felony disenfranchisement, poll taxes on poor people, gerrymandered districts, and the absence of polling locations on college campuses have all played a role in creating institutional barriers to voting for BIPOC communities, low-income low propensity voters, college students, returning citizens with past felony convictions, the elderly and the disabled. As a result, Tennessee consistently ranks in the bottom five states for voter participation and is the 3rd hardest state to vote in.

Pundits will have us believing that the Deep South is a foregone cause of red states, but the organizing power of Black women in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama tells a different story.

Thanks to the organizing work of Black women, Black voters in Georgia, yet again, swooped in to save America from itself by electing Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff to the U.S. Senate. No less than 24 hours later, the political pendulum swung from triumph in Georgia to tragedy at our nation’s Capitol. We witnessed on live television an angry mob of white supremacists and insurrectionists storm the U.S. Capitol in a last-ditch effort to overturn the election results in what they believed to be a country being stolen from them.

As we have learned repeatedly throughout American history, whenever Black people assert our self-determination and make progress towards equality and civil rights; whenever we force America

to live up to its constitutional ideals of 'We the People'; and whenever there are landmark victories that place Black people closer to an equal playing field with white Americans, there will almost certainly be an immediate whitelash of the most violent kind.

To understand this hyper-polarization of political forces, look no further than Tennessee. Birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. Battleground of the Civil War. Home to 105 Confederate monuments. Where Ida B. Wells was exiled for writing about lynching. Where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Where civil rights icons planned lunch counter sit-ins, bus boycotts and freedom rides. And now ground zero for voter suppression.

Organizers and activists have been attempting to turn the pages of history and build people power through long-term organizing and electoral wins. Much like Stacey Abrams, Nsé Ufot, Helen Butler and Felicia Davis in Georgia, The Equity Alliance, co-founded by Black women in 2016, has been on the front lines leading the fight to end voter suppression in Tennessee. In 2018, The Equity Alliance led a statewide voter outreach project, in partnership with BlackPAC, that registered more than 91,000 Black Tennesseans to vote and resulted in a 413% increase in turnout among Black voters for the 2018 midterms.

In 2019, Tennessee Secretary of State Tre Hargett retaliated against our success and passed legislation that would criminalize our efforts to conduct large-scale voter registration drives by instituting the stiffest civil and criminal penalties in the nation – up to a year in jail and \$10,000 fines. We protested this law, filed a lawsuit to repeal it, and won in federal court.

Protests in Nashville, organized and led by Black women, erupted in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Shortly afterward, local Black activists launched a 60-day protest in front of the Tennessee Capitol to demand the removal of the Nathan Bedford Forrest bust, a monument erected in honor of a slave trader and the first grand wizard of the KKK. To silence this dissent, Republican lawmakers called a special session to pass anti-protest legislation. The headline-grabbing law made protesting overnight on state property a Class E felony, punishable by up to six years in

prison and ultimately resulting in loss of voting rights.

When the 2020 presidential election approached, The Equity Alliance sued the Secretary of State and won our lawsuit to expand absentee ballot access so that every Tennessean, particularly Black residents who were dying from Covid-19 at three-times the rate of white residents, could vote safely by mail during the pandemic.

Political polarization reached new heights in 2021. Tennessee lawmakers introduced bills to abolish early voting, give business owners voting power, and remove liberal judges from the bench who ruled in favor of expanding absentee voting. The backlash is real, but these attempts to suppress votes have all failed, thanks to grassroots organizing.

Organizing in the Deep South is hard work; organizing in Tennessee is even more difficult. If we are going to give our movement a fighting chance to win victories that remove Jim Crow's grip on the Deep South, we must not overlook the battles being won in non-battleground states. With Black-women-led organizations building power and organizing in communities of color, we are laying the groundwork so that Tennessee, too, can go like Georgia.

The road to structural change and democracy reform is long, but we are inching closer in Tennessee. 2020 saw our state's first Black woman, Marquita Bradshaw, receive the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate. In 2020, 4.4 million Tennesseans registered to vote, and over 3 million turned out to vote in November. Tennessee is no longer 50th in voter turnout. We are electing the most progressive municipal governing bodies in history. More people are motivated to take action beyond Election Day, and a new power is rising, led by Black women and the New American Majority. Do not count Tennessee out. There is more work to be done to secure democracy and freedom for our people.

---