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MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK IN SC: UPDATE ON VOTING BILLS

A meeting of the Election Laws Subcommittee of House Judiciary was held Wednesday afternoon. The meeting was encouraging. Chairman Jay Jordan indicated that he plans another meeting next Thursday morning at which those who signed up to provide testimony on Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter's absentee voting bill H. 3822 will have time to complete their testimony.

Testimony was heard on Rep. Brandon Newton's bill H. 4150. The bill provides 14 days of no-excuse in-person early voting, which would be welcomed by voters across the political spectrum. However, those testifying indicated that the bill would make voting more difficult or even impossible for some by removing many absentee voting excuses. The early in-person voting period would not adequately substitute for this loss. Also, a formula for determining numbers of early polling places in each county would lead to crowded conditions in urban areas, great travel distances in geographically large low-density counties, and ultimately would create significant racial disparities.

Fortunately, Rep. Newton indicated that he is open to amendments to address these concerns. Elsewhere in South Carolina law the formula for determining polling locations consists of a maximum number of voters assigned to each location and a maximum distance between polling places and precinct boundaries. An early voting formula could be modeled on that practice. One county election official has suggested that the problems could be largely alleviated by removing the cap on numbers of early voting locations in the current H. 4150 formula. County election offices could then design the distribution of locations to minimize crowded polling places and prevent excessive travel requirements arising from great distances or lack of public transportation. Realistically, no South Carolina county is going to establish early voting locations on every corner, but a fair system can be designed to make early voting accessible.

Another voting bill, H. 3206, was taken up on Wednesday. It would prohibit "fusion voting" in which multiple parties are listed with the same candidate. Sponsor Rep. Bill Taylor said this allowed small parties to influence the outcomes of elections. Rep. Taylor's reasoning is contrary to the right of voters to select a candidate of their choice under the party umbrella that best

describes their interests. Indeed, even voters who identify with smaller parties have a right to influence the outcome of elections.

Chairman Jay Jordan indicated that additional bills will be added to the agenda for future meetings, including one planned for the morning of Thursday, April 29. The outcome could be more accessible and secure elections for all South Carolinians, or reduced access and greater racial disparities in voter access. We must continue to pay attention and be part of the dialogue.

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