



October 30, 2020

**Via U.S. Mail and Email**

Governor Bill Lee  
State Capitol  
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee,

We are writing to ask you to publicly guarantee that our state will do what it can to stop voter intimidation and to protect the voting process and Tennesseans' safety during and following the election.

Tennessee is experiencing historic voter turnout. More Tennesseans are registered to vote than ever before, and they are casting ballots in record numbers through mail-in ballots and during early voting.

It should be a proud moment for our state – voters of all backgrounds exercising their right to vote, in person or by mail, and participating in their democracy. But that democracy only works when we all agree on two fundamental ideas: the right to vote is sacred and the outcome of free, fair elections must be respected. We write out of concern that this time around, not everyone plans to honor these agreements.

When President Donald Trump was asked by a reporter in September if he would accept the outcome of the election, he responded: “I’ll keep you in suspense.” During the first presidential debate, the moderator asked President Trump to encourage his supporters “not to engage in [election-related] civil unrest.” He refused. Instead, he “urg[ed]... supporters go into the polls and watch very carefully because that’s what has to happen.” This comment followed his instruction to a white supremacist group – the Proud Boys – to “stand back and stand by.”

The president’s rhetoric raises concerns about his commitment to the sanctity of the vote. But it’s more than that. We worry his words serve as a call to harassment, coercion and violent unrest – during and after the election. Indeed, his answers call to mind a long history of electoral violence against voters of color in the South.

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Just a few generations ago – in Tennessee and throughout the South – voters of color were harassed, taxed, beaten and killed as they sought to exercise their fundamental democratic rights. We are reminded of this history with the recent death of Congressman John Lewis, who risked his life repeatedly so Black people could vote.

But the president has, again and again, emboldened those groups that would prefer the South look as it did decades ago. The images of rabid, racist white supremacists bearing torches in Charlottesville are burned into our collective memories. Between 2017 and 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center charted a 55% increase in white supremacist groups across the country. These groups have members in Tennessee and we have no reason to expect these individuals will respect the sanctity of the polling place and quietly accept the result of this election – especially when the president has already denied its legitimacy.

As our governor, you can deter voter intimidation and electoral violence. We ask that you make two things clear. First, publicly acknowledge that voter intimidation is a crime, and commit to holding to account anybody who harasses, coerces, intimidates or inflicts violence on individuals at the polling place. We also ask you to state clearly that post-election intimidation and violence – including that which targets the president's political opponents – will not be tolerated by the State of Tennessee.

Our hope is that our fears will not be realized on Election Day, or in the days that follow. But a strong statement from our governor holding to account would-be harassers, intimidators, and violent agitators would give comfort to concerned voters, sending the message that the state stands behind all Tennesseans. We ask you to speak out and provide necessary guarantees that our government will do what it can to protect the voting process and Tennesseans' safety during and following the election. Our rights depend on it.

Sincerely,

Hedy Weinberg  
Executive Director  
ACLU of Tennessee

Sabina Mohyuddin  
Executive Director  
American Muslim Advisory Council

Gloria J. Sweet-Love  
President  
TN State Conference NAACP

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Tennessee Advocates for Planned Parenthood

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cc: Brandon Gibson