

From the award-winning author
of *Southbound* and *The Parted Earth*

ON SALE
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ballot

by
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A book about the psychological, cultural, and
political significance of voting in an increasingly
anti-voting climate.

Q & A with *Ballot* author Anjali Enjeti

Why did you write *Ballot*?

I've been fascinated by elections ever since I cast my ballot in my second grade mock election, when then Governor Ronald Reagan challenged incumbent President Jimmy Carter. I have voted in almost every primary, local, state, and federal election since age 19. I've voted in four different states, two of them in the South. Voting has always felt like my calling. No one has ever needed to remind me to vote. I treat Election Day with the same degree of reverence as a holiday.



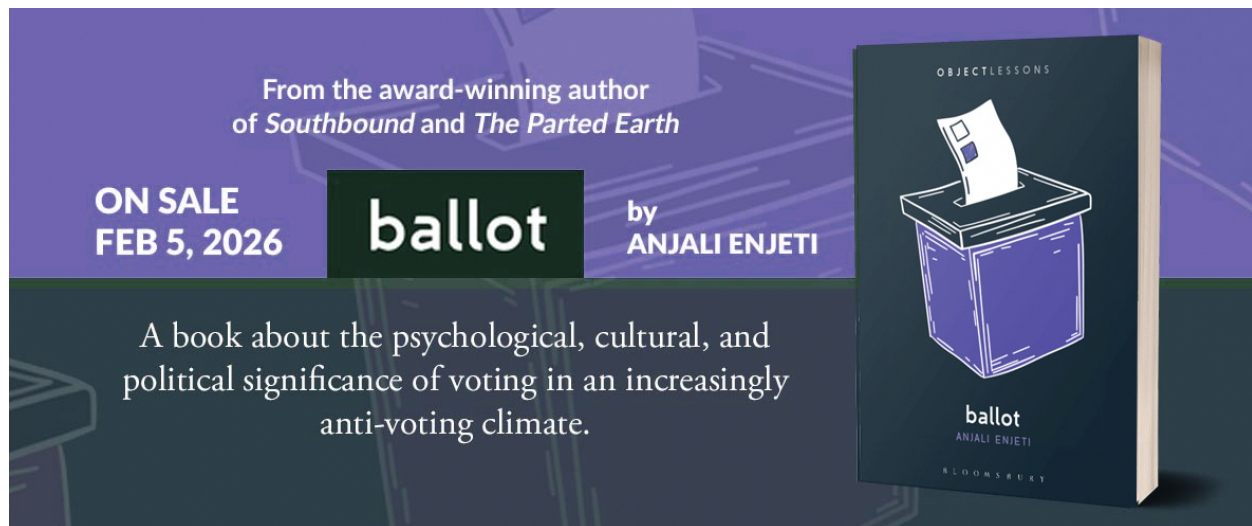
Over the last several years, I've volunteered to get out the vote for campaigns here in Georgia, founded a Democratic organization for South Asian voters, and trained to be a poll worker. I've also been on the receiving end of my state's anti-voting laws and an abominable degree of racialized gerrymandering.

What inspired this book was the backlash to the 2020 presidential election outcome, when Republican legislators—many of whom believed that Trump was the rightful winner—enacted a slew of voter suppression laws and redrew district lines to flagrantly disenfranchise Democratic voters.

Ballot is an ode to the act of voting, but also a warning. Our right to vote is slipping through our fingers, and our elected officials are failing to meet our needs the way they should.

What are the root causes of the most recent wave of anti-voting measures?

Almost all recently enacted anti-voting laws and policies stem from Supreme Court decisions issued over the last fifteen or so years. In 2010, *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* opened the floodgates to dark money and unlimited campaign contributions. President Carter summarized its catastrophic effect perfectly: "It violates the essence of what made America a great



country in its political system. Now it's just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or to elect the president.”

In 2013, the decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* gutted Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Before *Shelby*, the federal government had the power to reject new voting laws and policies proposed by states and counties with a history of voter suppression. This mechanism, known as “preclearance,” protected the right to vote for Black and other minoritized voters. *Shelby* jettisoned preclearance, transforming the Voting Rights Act into a shadow of its former self.

Have Republicans always blocked the right to vote?

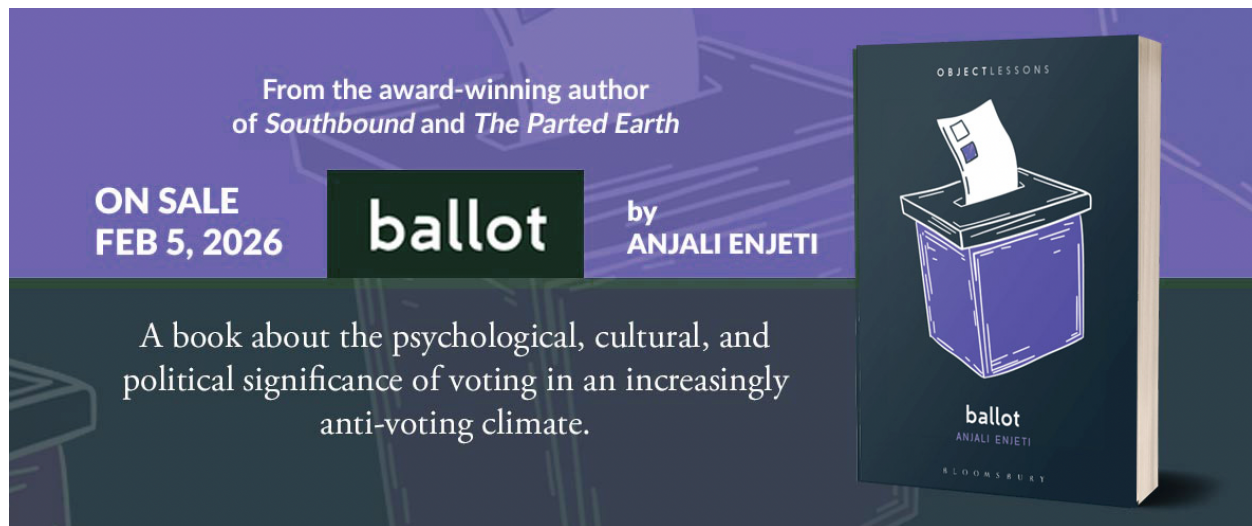
What may seem hard to believe, is that the right to vote was not always such a starkly bipartisan issue. After the 1965 Voting Rights Act became law, even Republican presidents supported it. Ronald Reagan renewed it for twenty-five years, and in 2006, George W. Bush renewed it again. Unsurprisingly, Republicans who had formerly supported voting rights quickly reverted to the mindset of Jim Crow once our first Black president, Barack Obama, assumed the Oval Office.

Who is hit hardest by voter suppression?

Black, Native, and Latino voters. Disabled voters. Voters with limited English proficiency, and limited literacy. Imprisoned voters and voters with felony convictions. Low-income voters, urban voters, elderly voters, and young voters. New US citizens. What's important to keep in mind is that voter suppression affects *everyone*, including nonvoters. We all have to live with the consequences of election outcomes, regardless of who is able to cast their ballot, or who is actively prevented from doing so.

What's it like to vote in red states?

Voting in red states is like playing a relentless game of Whac-a-Mole. There is always another voter suppression bill or policy around the corner to knock down. Red state legislatures are currently attacking voting rights on so many fronts, it's dizzying. And our federal judges, many of whom were appointed by President Trump, are gleefully upholding their efforts.



Why do voters in red states get blamed for voting against their own interests?

Voters in blue states don't understand the extent to which voters in red states are suppressed. Every time local organizers figure out how to educate and help voters get to the polls, Republicans crack down on voting. Jim Crow exists today in many forms, and one of these forms is voter suppression. Modern laws and policies that block minoritized voters from voting are as malicious and potent as the poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation tactics of yesteryear.

Where do elections make the biggest impact?

The most unsung elections are local elections—school board, city council, county commission, district attorney, sheriff, and many others. Local offices affect voters' day-to-day lives, and this is where getting out the vote offers the biggest bang for your buck. Voters should take local elections scheduled on “off” election years as seriously as they do presidential elections.

Can elections fix a nation that is so broken?

The short answer is no. They can't. Which might be difficult to hear, but it's true. Elections will not save us, and they have never actually saved us. It might be tempting to romanticize our electoral process—but we do so at our peril. It's vital that we put the function and purpose of elections into perspective, while also educating ourselves about where the pressure points are in the system. Voters tend to put all of their eggs in one basket—Election Day—then clock out the other 364 days a year. We need to relentlessly hold our elected officials accountable. We need to call, email, meet with them, and attend town halls. If they don't listen to us, we replace them.

And remember, elections are just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle. There are myriad ways to engage in activism outside of electoral politics.

Does our two-party system serve anyone?

Democrats and Republicans are not exactly the same, but they're also not terribly different. Both parties are driven largely by billionaires, corporations, special interest groups, and donors. If I had to put a figure on it, I'd say that the parties are about 75 percent similar. With that last 25 percent, Republicans are extinguishing civil and human rights, decimating the federal government, killing the planet, and making the rich, richer. Democrats, purportedly in opposition to these actions,



regularly sell out some of their most loyal voters from some of the most marginalized communities to try to win the favor of Republicans. The current two-party system, as it stands, won't get us anywhere anytime soon without a major reinvention.

What are your thoughts on the presidential 2024 election outcome?

Every problem related to modern US elections manifested in the outcome of the 2024 presidential election. Due to our archaic Electoral College, votes in only seven battleground states determined the winner. We had a wildly unpopular Democratic incumbent president, Joe Biden, who decided only 3.5 months before the November election to forgo his candidacy, which deprived voters of a bona fide presidential primary. Vice President Kamala Harris had little time to mount a campaign and did little to distinguish herself from her predecessor. Our rightwing former president, Donald Trump, was proudly promising to enact repressive policies, tear apart minority communities, and quash dissent. The 2024 presidential election was the Democratic Party's race to lose, and, unfortunately, the party did so in spectacular fashion.

Where do we go from here?

I don't think it's controversial or hyperbolic to suggest that the US, as a nation, is currently imploding. We will need to fight harder than we've ever fought for a more just electoral system. We need Congress to pass a new Voting Rights Act and to dump the Electoral College. We need population-based representation in the US Senate. We need to grant full voting rights and representation to voters living in the US territories, Washington, DC, and on Native lands. We need to restore voting rights to imprisoned voters and voters convicted of felonies. We need to kick partisan and racial gerrymandering to the curb. We also need voters to focus on the local level. Become a poll worker. Knock doors for local candidates. Vote in every municipal or county election.

For elections to realize their full potential, though, we should also establish a more humane, values-driven, holistic society that more ably serves our needs. And we need to start building it now.