

**Editor's Note:** Norman "Storm" Robinson III, Ph.D. is the chief innovation and education officer at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. The views expressed in this commentary are his own.

Perseverance. That's the word my fraternity brother, who was already in line to vote, loudly and clearly said to me as my wife and I took our place in line roughly 10 people behind him.

We arrived at the Gallery at South DeKalb in Decatur, Georgia, for early voting at 7:45 am on Monday, the first day of early voting. The polling place was located at the south end of the mall in a space previously occupied by a department store. The line was well formed when we arrived, stretching around the entire perimeter of what used to be a J.C. Penney. Behind us, the line was growing longer with anxious but resilient voters. I knew the wait was going to be a while. I posted a tweet with a photograph of the line going and coming and said how beautiful it was to see all of these people.

Still, I wasn't prepared for the reality of standing in a voting line for what would end up being four hours. Perseverance was the word I had to remember, and it's what many other Americans planning to vote in person will need to keep in mind too.

It's not just about finding the will to stand in a long line — it's also about choosing to do so as safely as we can in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

Covid-19 has made an impact on every aspect of life. Being the chief innovation and education officer of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, I know firsthand the severity of the situation and how the virus has changed how we live globally. Our board of trustees decided to move to virtual teaching and learning in March. As a member of the academy's administration, we have had to pivot, plan, and create the best and rigorous learning experiences for our students and staff with their health and safety in mind. Because we serve schools nationally with our outreach, the virus has altered significantly how we provide many of our services. I have been able to work from my permanent residence here in Georgia since March 13. We are constantly dissecting and discussing every word of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for the coronavirus, making sure that we have our students' health and safety in mind regarding our plans for instruction.

So, understand the trepidation I had waiting in line for so long. As a 54-year-old with a health history that puts me more at risk, I considered the option of voting by mail, but hearing the political rhetoric about the legitimacy of absentee mail-in ballots became a major concern for me. I didn't want to take any chances with my vote, so I was determined to face the risk of catching the virus and show up in person. I was proud and somewhat comforted to see that nearly everyone in line wore a mask.

But as I stood and inched forward as the line moved, the mathematics teacher in me observed that the lesson on distance and measurement may have been missed by some. Some voters in line were not 6 feet apart. This distance is more of an approximation than a hard fact. Experts have noted that staying 6 feet apart may not be far enough to lower the risk of spreading the virus in certain situations. And standing in a crowded line may be one of those instances, but this didn't seem to deter anyone. The people just wanted to vote. I assumed that for them, like me, the motivation to vote outweighed the risk of getting sick.

For me, standing in that long line was inspired by the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks and George Floyd. It was important for me to be there because we have a President who encourages the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." Our voices will be heard and our mandate is our vote.

Between hours two and three of me standing, I began thinking about my other motivation and resolve to vote. My thoughts were immediately on my mother and father. I can remember learning about Blackness and the responsibility being Black carries. My father, Norman Robinson Jr., is an architect. He earned his degree in architectural engineering from North Carolina A&T in 1963. My mother, Gloria M. Scott, a librarian, was an English major at Bennett College from 1960-63. Both of them participated in the demonstrations and sit-ins that marked this era of civil rights in Greensboro in 1960. The Greensboro Four, all students of North Carolina A&T, staged their first sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro on February 1, 1960. By February 5, 300 students had joined the cause for equity and civil rights.

Included in those 300 were my parents. My father shared with me when I was no older than 10 how they were arrested and detained for protesting and participating in sit-ins. My family is rooted in civil rights. To make sure that I was well equipped as a Black man, my family instilled in me that education was the weapon to use to battle injustice. He portrayed the passion and the purpose they had to engage in what the late John Lewis called "good trouble" to fight for the rights that we have today. On Monday I was reminded of the courageous actions my parents took so that I can exercise my right as a Black man in America.

As so often happens when you're standing in a line, you start to look around and notice the other people. In front of me was an older Black woman with sparkling gray hair, but she did not complain at all. At this point, she had been on her feet for over three hours.

She, too, was persevering.

Outside of the occasional knee lifts, sitting on the wall and stepping in place, she was a picture of resolve. We finally broke through the door of the polling place at 11:10 am. There were four tables right inside where the voter paperwork was to be completed. Neither the chairs at the tables nor the tables themselves were 6 feet apart. I wondered if this was by design. For some that may be an absurd thought, but really you have to wonder why basic guidelines weren't being followed.

Once inside, there was more waiting. This was the first time since my wife and I arrived hours earlier that I heard anyone complain.

For over 10 minutes, people who had already been standing for hours outside weren't allowed to sit at the tables inside. Another voter in front of us asked why we could not at least sit down and complete the paperwork. A poll worker said that they were trying to wait for the line to check ID's inside of the polling station to "go down." After the fellow voter complained on behalf of the woman with the sparkling gray hair, the poll workers made accommodations for her to sit. As she sat down, I marveled at her strength and resilience. She was going to vote.

Voting in the past in Georgia has always been a concern. Unfortunately, we have witnessed many attempts to silence the Black vote by removing voters from the rolls, not supplying enough working machines, and other strategies. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and his administration have appeared to make voting something of privilege instead of being a basic right of the citizens of this country. And this issue of voter disenfranchisement is evident in other states too.

In her book, "The Exceptional Negro," my colleague and friend Traci O'Neal Ellis wrote: "For every one of us who does not vote, it is one less vote the wrong candidate has to get to win, and two more votes that

the right candidate has to secure to get ahead." The four hours it took to vote is insignificant to the roughly 35,000 hours we will have to endure after January 20, 2021, until the next inauguration. Therefore, with the passion and purpose that was instilled in me by my parents, I voted.