

Congressman Elijah Cummings

Our right - and our reason - to vote

I will never forget Election Day 2002 - nor will I ever stop fighting to defeat the political forces that would stoop to intimidation or trickery.

Back in 2002, I arrived at my local voting place, preparing to vote in the governor's race. As I walked toward the school, they handed me this beautiful, glossy piece of campaign literature.

It looked better than any brochure that I had ever produced, and I said to myself, "Boy this is a wonderful photo. There's my pastor and [then-Housing and Urban Development Secretary] Mel Martinez, [former Baltimore delegate] Tony Fulton and me."

Then, I saw Robert Ehrlich in the picture with us, along with the words, "Democrats for Ehrlich."

That campaign literature was a lie – and, even today, I cannot fully express the anger that I felt in response to that trickery.

I had been one the biggest supporters of Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Bob Ehrlich's Democratic opponent in that 2002 election. So, when I discovered the fraud, I immediately went on the radio and television with the truth.

To set my neighbors straight, I publicly denounced the dirty trick that the Ehrlich campaign was trying to play on our community. I vowed to myself that I would do everything in my power to assure that we never would be defrauded nor victimized again.

The fires to protect our vote still burn deep inside of me.

My great, great grandfather, Mr. Scipio Rhame, was born a slave. Yet, during Reconstruction - just 3 years after his slavery had ended - he had the courage to be among the first of our people to register and vote in the 2nd Precinct of Manning, Clarendon County, South Carolina.

I often think fondly of Scipio Rhame, marveling at his determination to do the right thing back in 1868 despite the personal danger that he must have faced.

I am proud to share his blood – and humbled that he (and so many others) risked their lives so that we could be counted as full citizens of what now is the greatest nation in the world.

This is the personal reason why Election Day trickery makes me so angry. However, my commitment to "voter protection" is grounded in reasons that are far more compelling.

Voter intimidation, voter suppression, dirty tricks and fraudulent campaigning are cancers that threaten the very heart and soul of our democratic republic.

More than 142 years after Scipio Rhame took his stand, risking personal reprisals so that his descendants could have better lives, efforts to cheat us out of our franchise are still clear and present dangers to our community.

That is why Senator Ben Cardin, Delegate Sandy Rosenberg and I joined Maryland Democratic Party Chair Susan Turnbull, Voter Protection Director Amanda LaForge and Monumental Bar Association President Sayeeta Hampton-El at a public information press conference last week.

Our purpose was to remind voters to come to the polls informed, prepared and on their guard.

We also wanted our neighbors to know that Attorney Amanda LaForge and a committed army of Maryland lawyers will be there with us on Election Day, protecting our right to vote and have our votes counted.

We also announced that voters will have the additional security and protection of a free **Voter Empowerment Hotline [1.888.678.VOTE (8683)]** whenever the need may arise.

We will protect our voters because it is the right thing to do. It is the American thing to do.

These voter protections are especially important in this year's elections because our community has a lot at stake. Governor Martin O'Malley, Senator Barbara Mikulski, and our colleagues on Maryland's Democratic congressional team are time-tested allies and friends of our community.

Despite a constant assault of half-truths and abuse, they have stayed true to our values - protecting our schools, expanding our health care and doing everything within their power to save our jobs and our homes.

President Barack Obama believes in this Democratic Team – and so do I.

Our right and power to elect trusted leaders like these are what Scipio Rhame and his contemporaries had in mind when they summoned the courage to vote back in 1868.

On November 2, we should do the same.

Our future is at stake.

Congressman Elijah E. Cummings represents Maryland's Seventh Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives.