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OPINION

Restoring the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Making All Votes Matter

BY MARC H. MORIAL

On the eve of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a federal appeals court in New Orleans struck down a strict Texas voter identification law. In a unanimous ruling, the three-judge panel found that the law violated the federal Voting Rights Act and had a disproportionate and discriminatory impact on Blacks and Hispanics in the state.

The law—which requires forms of identification that many poor people and people in communities of color either do not have or have great difficulty accessing—made it far more difficult for these groups, including college students and the elderly,



to exercise their constitutional right as citizens to vote.

The importance of the ruling has not been lost on advocates battling on the frontlines to expand our nation's access to the ballot and thwart legislative attempts at voter suppression. It was a small victory in the larger enterprise of many Republican-controlled states efforts to limit voters' rights. It was a reminder of why the landmark civil rights legislation signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson 50 years ago remains an important weapon in the fight to expand access to the polls. And it underscored why Congress needs to make restoring the Voting Rights Act a political priority.

The aftermath of the Supreme Court's regrettable 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* to gut Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act—which established which states had to get advance

approval from the federal government before making any changes to their election laws—ushered in a wave of tough voter suppression laws.

Texas does not stand alone in its zeal to make it harder for Americans to vote. Wisconsin and North Carolina have passed similar voter identification laws—and the restrictive measures don't just end there. Eliminating same-day registration, shortening early voting, doing away with online voting registration and aggressively purging voters from the voter registration rolls are some of the other tactics legislators are using to deny eligible voters access to the polls. These lawmakers justify their restrictive policies with allegations of voter fraud—a claim that experts have proven to be unfounded time and again.

The myth of widespread voter identification fraud appears to be nothing more than a political fraud orchestrated by officials

eager to shift political fortunes to their party.

There is no right more fundamental to our democracy than the right to vote. We, as a nation, must ensure that all Americans who can vote have the opportunity to vote. The seemingly obvious idea that a democracy functions at its best when the largest number of its citizens are afforded the opportunity to determine who will lead it—and how it will be led—is under a modern-day legislative assault. If our elected officials truly do believe that all votes matter, Congress must commit to stemming the tide of suppression and get to the work of fully restoring voter protections in the Voting Rights Act.

The National Urban League stands with President Barack Obama and the civil rights and voting rights advocates calling for the full restoration of the Voting Rights Act and the reinstatement of the voter protections dismantled under the Supreme

Court's disastrous 2013 decision.

And we would do well to remember that this fight goes beyond maneuvers in the halls of Congress. As President Obama said during his remarks at the White House commemoration of the golden anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, "Far more people disenfranchise themselves than any law does, by not participating, by not getting involved."

The number of Americans who participated in the 2014 midterm elections was reportedly the lowest it's been since World War II. We cannot clamor for the right to vote only to turn around and ignore our civic duty. We owe that much and more to those who fought and bled and died to secure the right to vote because it is not enough to gain the right, we must employ, maintain and protect it as well.

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Racism and Sexism in the Progressive Movement

Black Lives Trump Politeness

BY ANNE SLATER AND STEVE HOFFMAN

There has been a great deal of heated debate on social media and elsewhere about Black Lives Matter activists shutting down a Bernie Sanders speech in Seattle on August 8. As attendees at this rally celebrating Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, we admire the courage of the two young black women who took over the stage to demand that Sanders, and other candidates for president, address the epidemic of violence and oppression faced by black communities across the nation.

The real question is why Bernie Sanders did not try to engage with them. Marissa Johnson and Mara Willaford boldly grabbed the microphone to point out that "progressive Seattle" is riddled with problems of police abuse, incarceration of youth of color, gentrification, disproportionate suspension of black schoolchildren, and other racial justice issues. And they demanded Sanders address racism. This is not the first time these issues have been raised to Sanders. At a Netroots Nation

conference in July, black women called on him to put forward a racial justice agenda to dismantle structural racism in the U.S.

At the Seattle event Sanders made no attempt to speak with the Black Lives Matter activists, have a dialogue, or address the crowd on this burning issue of our times. If he'd desired, surely one of the rally organizers could have walked a mic over to him. Instead, he stood aside and shook his head, and then walked off the stage without speaking.

Sanders' reputation as a progressive should in no way give him a pass on racial justice issues. He voted for Bill Clinton's Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which props up the racist prison-industrial complex. He voted to extradite Assata Shakur, an African American freedom fighter who is living in exile in Cuba. And his refusal to denounce Israel's war against Palestinians gives tacit consent to some of the most racist repression on the planet.

Some say that the Black Lives Matter protestors went too far by interrupting the event. That it was rude. But after hundreds of years of continuous racist violence in the "land of the free", it is ridiculous to expect anti-racist protestors to follow all Seattle protocols

on politeness. Especially when they see the violence only escalating. The murder of black men continues unabated and, in July alone, five black women died in police custody.

Besides, politeness was in short supply when many in the largely white audience reacted to the Black Lives Matter action with intense hostility. Some shouted racist and sexist invectives like "tase them," "get these black bitches off the stage," and "call CPS" (Child Protective Services). It was chilling.

Members and supporters of Radical Women and Freedom Socialist Party, and some others in the crowd, began loudly chanting to support the Black Lives Matter protesters. We debated those around us. When someone said they could not understand why the activists were taking over, one of our contingent shot back, "Have you had a family member arrested or killed by the police?" The answer was no, and a discussion began on why the fight for racial equality can't wait.

We could feel the majority of the rally crowd grow tense when the Black Lives Matter protestors leveled charges of white supremacist liberalism. We see a difference between liberals and those with an explicitly racist ideology. But

racism is racism. At times some of the viciously hostile responses sounded like a KKK rally. That's not so surprising in a country built on the foundations of genocide and slavery, where racism, which is essential to keeping the profit system alive, permeates everyday life. But it was downright hypocritical at a social justice event.

It is imperative that we tackle head-on the racism and sexism that reared its head in Seattle's progressive movement. And that we focus on the critical issues the Black Lives Matter activists raised and Sanders skirted.

For inspiration, let us remember that the history of the civil rights movement includes coura-

geous multi-racial organizers who were not polite. Folks of all colors risked their lives in the effort. We know that white folks committed to social change can channel their inner John Brown, a white man who collaborated with Harriet Tubman to free slaves and gave his life trying to spark an armed slave rebellion.

The "ill-mannered" disruption of the rally sparked a new national discussion about racism. It's time for everyone to link arms with the Black Lives Matter movement in the fight for radical change now.

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