



“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

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National Chamber Trashes Voting Rights

I have enjoyed an excellent relationship with the National Black Chamber of Commerce over the years. I have conducted media training sessions at national conventions, spoken at functions sponsored by state and local affiliates, and enjoyed a friendship with many of its top officers, including president and co-founder Harry C. Alford. That's why I was stunned and mystified when, in the course of researching a challenge to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, to learn that the group had filed a friend-of-the-court petition with the U.S. Supreme Court supporting an objection filed by Shelby County, Ala.

In short, Shelby County – after losing at the federal district and appeals court level – appealed to the Supreme Court, hoping to overturn the provision of the Voting Rights Act that requires jurisdictions with a proven history of discrimination in elections to get pre-clearance from the Justice Department before implementing changes in voting laws that might adversely impact Black voters. The court is expected to issue a ruling next summer.

In its petition, the National Black Chamber of Commerce said, “Section 5 is no longer necessary to combat widespread and persistent discrimination in voting and now, perversely [my emphasis], serves as an impediment to racial neutrality in voting and to the empowerment of state and local officials who represent minority constituencies.”

Perverse? Nothing is more per-

THE CURRY REPORT

George E. Curry



verse than a Black business group, with no direct interest in a case, favoring the elimination of a major tool that helps remove the last vestiges of discrimination against African-American voters and officeholders.

I placed a call to Alford to ask why the National Black Chamber of Commerce decided to align

Black elected officials.

But there is only one problem with Alford's position – no reputable national organization representing Black elected officials have called for an end to Section 5 or any other provision of the Voting Rights Act. Not the Congressional Black Caucus. Not the National Black Caucus of State Legislators. Not the National Conference of Black Mayors. Not the National Organization of Black County Officials.

I told Alfred even if he believes what he was saying, there are ways for jurisdictions covered by Section 5 to “bail out” of the pre-clearance requirement. In fact, I told him, 46 jurisdictions had done just that and two more cases are

oughly familiar with.

Finally, the National Black Chamber of Commerce (not to be confused with its rival U.S. Black Chamber) asserted in its petition: “The Chamber rejects the assumption underlying Congress's reauthorization of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act that the exceptional circumstances which justified close federal oversight of the electoral practices in many states and localities in 1965 and 1975 persist today.”

Evidently, that was another perverse instance of Alford not reading far enough into the public record.

Congress renewed Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act in 1970, 1975, 1982 and for another 25 years in 2006. In its petition, the Justice Department noted, “based on its exhaustive review of the record, the [lower] court confirmed that Congress had found ample evidence of a history and ongoing pattern of purposeful, state-sponsored voting discrimination in covered jurisdictions.”

With bipartisan support, the Voting Rights Act was extended in 2006 on a 390-33 vote in the House and a 98-0 vote in the Senate. George W. Bush signed the bill into law.

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The National Black Chamber of Commerce is opposing extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

itself with right-wing groups that routinely oppose affirmative action, the Voting Rights Act, and any other legislation that seeks to level the playing field for African-Americans and other people of color.

Alford said he filed the brief out of concern for Black lawmakers, many elected after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He asserted that the cumbersome pre-clearance process is a burden on

pending. So if any official wants to be exempted, all they need to do is show they have not run discriminatory voting operations for the past 10 years.

After having assured me earlier that he had read the voting law, Alford said evidently he had “not read far enough” because he was unaware of that bail out provision. It's perverse for Alford to challenge the provision of an important law that he was not thor-

Raising the Social Security Retirement Age?

Discussions of the fiscal cliff also include discussions about ways to change Social Security and Medicare benefits in order to save money. One of the proposals is to raise the Social Security retirement age to 70. After all, some argue, there is nothing magic about 65 or 67, so why not push the rate up to 70?

The difference is the kind of work we do. I can't imagine that I will ever stop talking and writing, advanced age notwithstanding. However, someone who is waiting tables, working in a nursing home, or doing private household work might not want, but need, to slow it down after 65, or maybe even earlier. Some people take their Social Security earlier, although they are lower, at age 62. Tired, and with sometimes broken bodies, they'd rather take less money than keep working. Consider the construction worker who has not moved up into management. Will he (or in 10 percent of cases, she) still want to wield a hammer, climb onto roofs, or do other heavy work? Raising the Social Security retirement age hurts these people.

These folk are also hurt because their life expectancy is also lower. People with less education have shorter life expectancies than those who are more highly educated. African Americans have lower life expectancy rates than Whites, (although this gap is closing. Thus,



BENNETT COLLEGE

Julianne Malveaux

people who have paid into the system, but they will get less out of when they live shorter lives. Again, those at the bottom are disadvantaged by public policy that

the dangers of smoking, but women who lack a high school diploma are more likely than others to smoke. Indeed, among women the levels of smoking have risen, while smoking rates had declined among men. Researchers who study these issues suggest that women are smoking more because of the many pressures women face, including being part of the “sandwich generation” juggling both elder care and child care. I was talking to an elder whose smoking habit spans more

decade ago. On the other hand, only 10 percent of those with a college education lacked health insurance.

While Americans do not like to talk about class, poor and working class people do less well in our society than others. For example, attempting to eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood has a greater impact on poor women without health insurance than others whose contraceptive needs are covered by their insurance. Yet the right wing attempts to characterize Planned Parenthood as an abortion center, not a place that offers education on contraception, breast cancer, and other health issues.

Extending the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy certainly has a disproportionate impact on the poor and working class, but there are hidden attacks on the poorest in our nation. Raising the Social Security retirement age, eliminating Planned Parenthood, and attacking Obamacare are all implicit attacks on the poor. The class status of our federal elected officials suggests that Congress just doesn't get it. But we elect these people. What does that say about us?

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While Americans do not like to talk about class, poor and working class people do less well in our society than others

seems race and class neutral.

Why the gap in life expectancy? Part has to do with higher rates of smoking among less educated (which propels obesity), and the lack of health insurance, especially among those with lower incomes and less education. Obamacare partly solves the insurance problems, but those living in an unreal time warp seem to think Mitt Romney won the election and they are acting accordingly by attempting to repeal health care reform.

Most of us got the memo about

than 50 years, and when we talked about the issue, she responded that she was over 70, still living, and wasn't about to change. We talked a bit about stress and ways that smoking is a tension-tamer for her. I suggested she try yoga, and she just about laughed me out of the room.

The health insurance gap between those who are highly educated and less well educated is growing. Among working age adults without a high school diploma, 43 percent have no health insurance, up from 35 percent a