

Civil Rights Leaders Upset Over Non-Voting Rights Act Hearing

By James Wright
Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspaper

Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, sparked controversy on Jan. 14 saying that, "The Voting Rights Amendment Act" – which would restore the pre-clearance requirement by the Justice Department for states mainly in the South – "is not necessary." He has decided not to hold a hearing on the bill that would restore key elements of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and this has outraged African-American and civil rights leaders.

Goodlatte said the watered down Voting Rights Act (VRA) that is presently in effect protects voters from discrimination but Rep. George Butterfield (D-N.C.), chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, disagrees. "I am deeply troubled that Goodlatte doesn't think it is necessary to restore the Voting Rights Act," Butterfield said. "We began this Congress very hopeful to build upon the bipartisan work of Reps. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) and Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.). If this is indeed the position



Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr. - Voting Rights Act on Aug. 6, 1965.

VRA and we have bipartisan support on this," Shelton said. Shelton said that representatives of the Virginia NAACP, including those who live in Roanoke, a major city in Goodlatte's district, met with him, too.

One of the arguments anti-VRA advocates make is the election and re-election of President Obama in 2008 and 2012, respectively. They say that minorities cannot be considered dis-

because of our first African-American president."

Shelton said it was because of the VRA that Obama became president and it should be preserved as a tool to help people become more involved in politics.

Collier-Gonzalez said government identification as the only acceptable form for citizens to be able to vote is similar to the poll taxes that some Southern states in the pre-Civil Rights era levied against its citizens with the subtle purpose of disenfranchising Blacks. She notes that many young people, seniors, and low-income citizens don't have government identifications that are acceptable to voter registrars.

Butterfield is urging the House Republican leadership to override Goodlatte's decision.

"I call on Speaker [John] Boehner, Majority Leader [Kevin] McCarthy and Majority Whip Steve Scalise to reverse this decision and make restoring the VRA a priority," the representative said. "The weakening of the VRA left millions of Americans vulnerable to discriminatory state laws. To do nothing sends a terrible message, not only to minorities, but to anyone who believes the right to vote is essential to our democracy and way of life."

enfranchised when the country, still majority White, elected an African-American to its top political position.

However, Kathleen Collier-Gonzalez, senior attorney and director of the voter protection for the Advancement Project, counters that view. "The measure of success is not the re-election of an African-American president," she said. "You still have very serious problems in terms of people who don't have 'acceptable' voting identification, and states reducing the early voting period and eliminating Sunday voting. As a matter of fact, I think there is a backlash

'If this is indeed the position of the entire Republican Conference, then they have clearly drawn a line in the sand'

of the entire Republican Conference, then they have clearly drawn a line in the sand – one in which they are on the wrong side of."

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat. It has been renewed with amendments by Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush – all Republicans. However, the Supreme Court gutted Section 4B and 5 of the VRA that required states and local jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination in voting to approve election law and practices with the Justice Department.

The court's conservative majority said the VRA was outdated and that Congress should update it to reflect the changes that have taken place.

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, also disagrees with Goodlatte's decision. "Chairman Goodlatte has paid no attention to the rampant voting discrimination still happening throughout the country, most recently in the 2014 midterm elections," Henderson said. "The now-weakened [VRA] lacks the ability to protect voters from discrimination before they are denied the right to vote. The remedies that the chairman says still exist are costly and time consuming to pursue through the courts and decisions in these cases often come long after voters have been excluded from elections that they have every right to participate in."

Hilary Shelton, Washington NAACP bureau chief, said his group met with Goodlatte last year to discuss legislation to restore the VRA to its original form. "We made it clear that we supported hearings on the

Record Level of Criminal Exonerations

By Freddie Allen
NNPA Senior Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Black criminal defendants accounted for roughly 46 percent of the 125 known exonerations in 2014, the highest annual number of exonerations recorded since 1989, according to a national registry that tracks wrongful convictions.

According to a recent report by The National Registry of Exonerations, the next highest total for exonerations was 88 recorded in 2012 and 87 in 2013. Researchers said that prosecutors have increasingly taken a harder look at flawed cases, which contributed to jump in exonerations.

The powerful role that prosecutors play in the criminal justice system has increasingly drawn sharp public criticism following grand jury proceedings involving the highly publicized deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of White police officers.



Attorney General Eric Holder

In the chokehold death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, N.Y. and shooting deaths of John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio and the teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., grand juries chose not to indict police officers.

Attorney General Eric Holder has called for reform in sentencing practices and urged federal prosecutors to exercise greater discretion in non-violent drug cases.

Researchers with the exonerations registry reported 716 exonerations of Black criminal defendants, compared to 624 Whites through February 6, 2015. That includes 330

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exonerations for homicides, 167 for sexual assaults and another 179 for other crimes including drug crimes.

Blacks accounted for roughly 46 percent of the known exonerations in 2014. The number of Black criminal defendants exonerated in 2013 accounted for 47 percent of known cases, compared to 40 percent for Whites.

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