

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Voting Rights Threatened Amid 50th-Anniversary Celebrations

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — As the nation marked the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 this summer, civil rights groups and leaders, union representatives, elected officials, and citizens gathered at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to address the threats to voting rights today.

“We stand here today with two missions: To celebrate the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and to recommit ourselves to making sure that the victory won 50 years ago will not be wiped away by a Supreme Court that has shown us supreme disrespect by gutting a key section of the Voting Rights Act,” said Charles Steele, Jr., president and CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which co-sponsored the rally. “The illegitimate reason for this action is that it’s all about politics...where people figure if they can suppress 10 to 15 percent of the Black vote, they can steal an election.”



As the Voting Rights Act celebrated its 50th anniversary this summer, many states - with Oregon being a notable exception - noted an erosion in voting rights in recent years.

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Section 4 gave the voting law teeth; it provided an objective measure for discriminatory practices, and flagged the states that had discriminated against Black voters. Section 5 mandated that these flagged states could not change voting procedures without first clearing the proposed changes with the U.S. Justice Department or a federal judge in Washington. The states could be exempted from such requirements upon proving they no longer discriminated.

Two years ago, in a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court found Sections 4 and 5 unconstitutional. The conservative majority ruled that the measure, based on practices and data from the 1960s, was no longer relevant in today’s racial and political climate.

Two hours after the ruling, the Texas attorney general authorized a voter ID law that the Justice Department had previously blocked as a civil rights violation. According to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 22 states passed new voting restrictions in time for the 2014 midterm elections.

Voting faces other challenges as well. Thanks to felony disenfranchisement laws, 6 million Americans cannot vote - 13 percent of Black men fall into this gap, which is seven times the national average, according to the Brennan Center. States with a Republican majority in the state house are also closing polling locations, chipping away at early voting, and

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—Senator Bernie Sanders

redrawing district lines to dilute the voting power in communities of color.

Two 2016 Democratic presidential candidates were present at an August rally in the shadow of the King Memorial on the Mall, and both expressed strong disapproval of this current state of affairs.

“Anybody who is suppressing the vote, anybody who is intentionally trying to keep people from voting - because that candidate knows that people will vote against him or her - that person is a political coward,” said Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.). “That person is undermining American democracy.”

Democratic candidate Willie Wilson, a Chicago businessman, talked about the difficulty of long-shot candidate participating in the political process.

“I am a product of the Voting Rights Act and an example of what happens when that right is gained,” he stated, sharing his life story as a young sharecropper with a seventh-grade education turned international businessman, among other successes.

“When I ran for mayor of Chicago...it cost me more than \$200,000 just to get on the ballot. When I finally got on...50,000 people, my supporters were told they weren’t on the [registered voter] roll. When I am denied, you are denied.”

Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton sent her regards via letter. Her platform on voting rights included declaring Election Day a federal holiday; restoring voting rights to people with criminal records; and automatic, universal voter registration at 18 years old. No Republican candidates attended the event.

“I’m a little concerned today because...we sent invitations to every presidential candidate. Not one Republican candidate has chosen to show up. I don’t know of one major outlet reporting of the Voting Rights anniversary today, as if we do not have a problem,” said Martin Luther King III. “So I have mixed feelings today, and whenever I come to this site I’m reminded that the work is not done.”

“We have one of the lowest voter turnouts in the world. We should be trying to figure out how to increase voter turnout, not reducing the low numbers we already have,” Steele said.

“Let’s not forget how we got to this point. Not only was blood shed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., some people actually gave their lives.... But they wouldn’t let nobody turn them around. And we ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around.”

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.



At Home Forward, we are committed to answering Dr. King’s urgent question. We support participation of minority-owned, women-owned and emerging small businesses on Home Forward projects. Contact us to learn more about what we are doing for others and how you can get involved.

For more information, contact:

Berit Stevenson
Procurement and Contracts Manager
503.802.8541
Berit.Stevenson@homeforward.org

homeforward.org

