

# **Black Baptist leader calls denial of voting rights ‘evil’**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—On the day of a major voting rights debate on Capitol Hill, a social justice coordinator for the Progressive National Baptist Convention said fighting for voting rights is an effort to conquer evil.

“This convention practices a ministry of erosion,” said Willie D. Francois III, co-chair of the convention’s social justice arm, during a Jan. 18 news conference held in Atlanta and livestreamed on the denomination’s social media.

“What does that mean? We keep showing up so that we wear evil down. The denial of voting rights is evil. The protection of Senate rules over the protection of the public is evil.”

The news conference was held at the historically Black denomination’s midwinter board meeting, just as legislators on Capitol Hill debated voting rights bills that the Progressive National Baptists, along with a number of other faith organizations, support. However, the bills are not expected to pass.

## **Working to change filibuster rule**

Francois said Progressive National Baptists would be working with Faiths United to Save Democracy, a new coalition that has urged the Senate to change its rule about the filibuster, a stalling technique that requires 60 votes to end it and which is often used by the minority party to stop a bill from passing with a simple majority vote.

“The filibuster that was used to block anti-lynching laws cannot be used right now to block voter expansion,” Francois said. “And so we’re calling on our Senate to reform its filibuster to ensure that we can actually pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and we can also pass the Freedom to Vote Act.”

Regardless of what happens during the current debate, Progressive National Baptist leaders said they intend to move ahead with plans to lobby members of Congress in March and register voters weekly in their congregations and communities, aiming to increase voter rolls by 500,000.

Pastor Adolphus Lacey from New York’s Brooklyn borough said these efforts will continue despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

“COVID is real; COVID is a threat,” said Lacey, a Progressive National Baptist social justice commissioner. “But even more serious than COVID, as real and scary as it is, is to see thousands and thousands of thousands of voters not being able to vote, and it was on our watch. We refuse to stop. We refuse to turn around.”

## **‘This is a call to action’**

The denomination’s voter registration initiative will be aimed particularly at millennials and members of Gen Z.

But it will also focus on states with key races expected to have close margins, said Darryl Gray of St. Louis.

“We don’t want to just register a half a million people,” said Gray, a Progressive National Baptist pastor who served in the Kansas Senate in the 1980s and ran an unsuccessful 2020 campaign for Missouri state representative. “We want to register a half a million people in United States senatorial campaigns that are going to be consequential.”

Progressive National Baptist leaders noted they belong to the denominational home of Martin Luther King Jr., in a state at the center of voting rights debates. King co-pastored Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was influential in the civil rights movement, also is based in the city.

“We believe it is no coincidence that this convention, born out of the need to fight for justice, is in this state and city at such a time as this when our voting rights are under fierce attack,” said David R. Peoples, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

“This is a call to action from the Progressive National Baptist Convention. We come to not just pray. We come to not just push. We come to not just preserve. We’ve come to protect the right to vote.”