

Progressive National Baptists call to restore, advance voting rights

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DALLAS—On the eve of the landmark Voting Rights Act’s 50th anniversary—and hours after a federal appeals court ruled against Texas’ voter ID law—three groups historically linked to Martin Luther King Jr. launched a movement to restore rights they insist the U.S. Supreme Court “gutted.”

Representatives of the [Progressive National Baptist Convention](#)—in Dallas for their 54th annual meeting—and leaders of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) and the [Drum Major Institute for Public Policy](#) joined in calling Congress to pass the [Voting Rights Advancement Act](#).



James Perkins, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, addresses a news conference on the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, joined by

Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas. He urged Congress to pass the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2015. (PHOTO / Ken Camp) At a voting rights forum sponsored by Progressive National Baptists, Andrew Young—a minister, activist and confidante of King during the civil rights movement—applauded the predominantly African-American group for taking the lead in sparking “a new movement” to ensure all Americans’ right to vote.

“We need to make American democracy right,” said Young, former member of the U.S. Congress, ambassador to the United Nations, mayor of Atlanta, Ga., and director of the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy. “If it’s not right in America, it won’t be right anywhere else in the world.”

Powerful people want to deny others the right to vote because they recognize “voting is about controlling the money,” Young asserted.

Forty states have implemented “suppressive” voting laws since the Supreme Court “eviscerated” the Voting Rights Act of 1965, insisted Martin Luther King III, also representing the Drum Major Institute.

Supreme Court decision of 2013

In their 2013 [ruling on Shelby County v. Holder](#), the Supreme Court struck down a section of the Voting Rights Act that required specified state and local governments with a history of racial discrimination to obtain federal preclearance before making any changes to voting laws.

“We’re back to zero. We’re back to states’ rights,” said Charles Steele, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Speakers cited what they called a concerted effort not only to keep African-Americans from the voting booths, but also to suppress the voting rights of the working poor and students.

“Sadly, we have witnessed a merciless and relentless assault on voting rights,” said Raphael Warnock, pastor of [Ebenezer Baptist Church](#) in Atlanta and chair of Progressive National Baptists’ justice commission.

Texas voter law requiring ID

Within hours after the Supreme Court’s ruling on provisions in the Voting Rights Act, the Texas Legislature passed a law requiring voters to show an approved form of identification—a driver’s license, passport, state-issued ID card, concealed handgun license or military ID—to vote, with or without a voter registration card, he noted.

“Texas led the way” in passing restrictive voting laws, Warnock said. “Texas is Ground Zero.”

The right to vote represents a citizen’s exercise of his or her God-given freedom of choice, said James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York and senior scholar with the Drum Major Institute.

Any denial of voting rights represents an assault on human rights and a “crime against nature,” Forbes insisted.

Voting rights ‘a spiritual matter’

“The issue of voting rights is a spiritual matter,” he said.

Participants in the voting rights forum at the Progressive National Baptist Convention’s annual meeting cited as “providential” the timing of a ruling by the federal 5th Circuit Court of Appeals.

The three-judge panel in New Orleans [ruled](#) the Texas voter ID law has a discriminatory effect on minorities and violates parts of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. However, the appellate panel did not agree with a federal judge’s opinion the voter ID law is comparable to an illegal poll tax.

The morning after the forum, SCLC and Drum Major Institute representatives participated in a ceremony at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., marking the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, while Progressive National Baptist leaders called a news conference in Dallas to denounce voter suppression and announce their plans for a massive voter registration drive.

Warnock urged participants in the two Republican presidential debates scheduled later that day—a prime-time face-off featuring the top 10 candidates and an earlier event for second-tier hopefuls—to address voting rights.

Waiting for Republican candidates' positions

“We would like to know where those who are vying for the presidency of the United States of America stand on the issue of voting rights,” he said. “This is an American crisis unfolding on our watch.”

Progressive National Baptists hope to register 200,000 voters by 2016. Along with other partners—including seven other historically African-American denominations and other faith group—they hope to register 1 million voters, Warnock said.

After the news conference, some Progressive National Baptists planned to go to freshman orientation at [Paul Quinn College](#) in Dallas—a liberal arts school affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church—to register eligible students as voters and talk to them about voting rights, he added.

Congresswoman [Eddie Bernice Johnson](#), D-Dallas, joined the Baptist leaders in calling for the protection of voting rights.

“The nation is in a crisis of conscience right now,” Johnson said. The United States has fought wars around the world to defend democratic principles, but democracy is endangered domestically now, she asserted.

Some American politicians “claim to defend our Constitution but treat the right to vote as political currency,” and some judges “claim to uphold the letter of the law but manipulate its meaning for their own misguided political interests,” Johnson said.

“We spread democracy around the world to advance our own principles, but we deny the very promises of democracy to our own people,” she said.

King: ‘Give us the ballot’

Civil rights pioneer Otis Moss Jr. recalled King’s call 58 years ago, “Give us the ballot.”

In the decades following Reconstruction, African-Americans who tried to exercise the right to vote often faced lynching, Moss noted.

“Now we are being lynched by secretaries of state with demeaning, foolish, humiliating and disenfranchising legislation, policies and practices,” he said.

“Some things do irreparable harm. To disenfranchise anybody at any time is to deny that person his or her humanity and do damage that’s beyond repair.”

Fifty years after President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, African-American people of faith should be gathering in his home state to celebrate that victory, said Frederick Douglass Haynes III, pastor of [Friendship-West Baptist Church](#) in Dallas.

A call to ‘spiritual and moral arms’

“Today should have been the convivial celebration of the golden anniversary of a bill that was signed in blood by what took place on the Edmund Pettus Bridge” where police attacked peaceful civil rights demonstrators as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery,

Ala., Haynes said. “Instead, we are issuing a call to spiritual and moral arms.”

Anyone who claims the provisions in the 1965 Voting Rights Act the Supreme Court rejected had “outlived their usefulness” does not understand the political climate in the United States in 2015, James Perkins, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, said in an interview.

“If anything, it is more necessary now than it was then,” said Perkins, pastor of [Greater Christ Baptist Church](#) in Detroit. “Back then, the consciences of people could be pricked when injustice was brought to light. This group today is different. They are intentionally trying to undermine democracy.”