

Congress must resist vote obstructionists

By Marc H. Morial
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The Voting Rights Act reauthorization recently suffered a political setback in the U.S. House after the GOP leadership caved in to opposition by a small group of right-wing extremists, abruptly canceling a vote on extending provisions of the historic 1965 law that are set to expire next year.

In a surprise reversal, U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Republican leaders took the legislation off the House calendar on June 21, with promises to renew efforts to pass it once the concerns of a few are resolved.

The bill's detractors felt compelled to wait until a meeting of House Republicans on the day of a scheduled floor vote, to air their objections — not in May after the bill won nearly unanimous support from the House Judiciary Committee or after it was introduced with widespread bipartisan support from both chambers of the U.S. Congress.

Earlier this year, Hastert promised to proceed quickly on the legislation, calling it one of his top priorities. Or so he said.

Since 1965, Congress has renewed the act three times and added three new provisions: extending the right to vote to 18-year-olds in 1970; protecting voting rights for non-English speakers in 1975; and, most contentious of all, creating majority minority congressional districts in 1982.

The provisions most problematic to the act's detractors are: federal oversight of voting rules for nine states with documented history of voter discrimination — otherwise known as Section 5 — and the requirement of foreign language ballots in areas with large populations of non-English speakers.

Section 5, the so-called pre-clearance provision, requires districts covered to submit all proposed changes in voting laws to the U.S. Department of Justice for approval.

Reps. Lynn Westmoreland and Charlie Norwood, loudest of the House objectors,

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selves. Maybe that's why they knew how to do so many things with their hands. As I look back at my grandparents, aunts, and uncles, I am amazed at what they did during what were pretty rough times, at least socially.

They established their own business enclaves all over this country, places like Greenwood in Tulsa and Hayti in Durham, N.C. They amassed wealth beyond imagination and, comparatively speaking, far beyond what most of us have today. Prohibited from participating in the general marketplace and without the government subsidies handed out to White-owned corporations, they started businesses and eventually created A.G. Gaston Enterprises, S.B. Fuller Company, Madame C.J. Walker's hair products, Johnson Publishing Company, and Motown Records. What strength and determination they had.

Aren't you proud of who you are, where you came from, and what your relatives did to make sure you had food on the table, clothes on your back and a roof over your head? We should celebrate our Blackness and always cherish our culture. As Claud Anderson teaches, we should be proud to be Black because God made us first, in His image; and He placed us in a perfect place, on land that contained every vital mineral and natural resource necessary for growth and prosperity.

He gave us enough wisdom to share with the world and bring others out of the darkness into the light of knowledge. We are His

claimed the legislation unfairly singles out certain jurisdictions because of past discrimination. They want the act to apply to all states regardless of past history or none at all, possibly rendering the law unconstitutional.

In a written statement, Westmoreland said it made no sense to keep covered states "in the penalty box for 66 years" based on 1964 election results.

But the majority of all federal objections have occurred since 1982, when Section 5 was last reauthorized, attesting to the persistence of discrimination that exists in areas covered by the act. For the past 40 years, my own home state of Louisiana has yet to produce a voting plan that garnered Justice Department approval the first time through.

It should not be surprising that both Westmoreland and Norwood hail from Georgia, where the state legislature tried to impose a photo identification requirement upon voters without making provisions for those who couldn't afford to shell out \$20 for a five-year state-issued ID. The state's pre-clearance plan received U.S. Justice Department approval in August of 2005, over staff objections, only to fail in the courts.

A U.S. District Court struck it down, comparing it to an unconstitutional poll tax. U.S. District Judge Harold Murphy concluded that it would "most likely have prevented Georgia's elderly, poor and African-American voters from voting."

Had the courts not intervened in Georgia, poor, elderly and African-American would have lost their voting rights. So, it's obvious that while major strides have been made, there's still vast room for improvement.

The Voting Rights Act's enactment was a hard-won victory of the Civil Rights Move-

ment. Against the backdrop of the "Bloody Sunday" violence against civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Ala., President Lyndon Johnson unveiled the legislation to Congress on March 15, 1965. Nearly five months later, he signed it into law after it passed House and Senate muster with only token opposition, mainly from lawmakers in states covered by Section 5. Back then, anti-civil rights extremists tried to use stalling



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the early 1970s and has written a number of books, including "Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys" and "Keeping Black Boys out of Special Education."

Other Black educators were equally cautious.

"I don't think we should be excited right now. We can be encouraged," said Jonathan Foy, principal of the Urban Assembly Academy for History and Citizenship for Young Men. "If you have a knife six inches in your back and you pull it out three inches, is that progress? That's kind of where we are."

Although Foy's Bronx, N.Y., all-male school of about 200 Black and Latino ninth and 10th graders has produced some promising results.

"We've actually shown through data that we're improving students' academic skills, reading level, math level, but many of them came to us so far below that they're still not at a standard where they can compete," Foy says. "It's (the study) definitely something to build on, but we're not close to where we need to be to really allow them to compete on a global level."

This fall, the school that prides itself on its stringent rules, culturally inspired field trips and specialized classes, such as the one that allows the "scholars" to run a mock record label, will expand to the 11th grade — increasing the student population to around 300. Next year, the 12th grade will be added.

While the recent study explained that things were getting better for all younger boys, the gaps between boys of all races and girls in high school widen between the eighth and 12th grades, experts say the gap is even bigger between Black boys and girls in that age group.

Fast forward a few years to when it's time for Black boys and girls to enter college. Then, Kunjufu said, the gap is further reflected in

Black male and female college enrollment.

He said there are 609,000 Black men in college and more than 1 million Black women currently enrolled.

"No group has a wider disparity," he said.

Kunjufu, like many experts, considers the eighth grade pivotal. "Our boys are not dropping out in 12th grade, they're dropping out in ninth grade. We need to focus on that particular population," he said. Kunjufu explains that a number of things happen between the fourth and eighth grades.

"When children move from the smaller elementary schools that could be 300 to 500 [in population] to the high school that's 2,000 to 4,000, they get lost in the shuffle," he said.

"As the age increases, teacher expectations, unfortunately, decrease. The teaching style changes. It moves from a right brain, or whole brain teaching style to more of a left brain teaching style, peer pressure increases, parental involvement decreases. Probably the most significant one of all is that as they matriculated from kindergarten through the seventh grade, in many cases, they have yet to experience a male teacher, specifically a Black, male teacher so they begin to think that academics are for females."

Smith, the foundation president, cites several factors in improving Black male achievement.

"For Black boys to be successful, there actually has to be a culture at the school that believes in Black boys," she explains. "There has to be a culture in the school where they're not afraid of Black boys, there has to be a culture in the school which says we're going to make you successful whether you want to be or not."

Society also plays an important role, says Foy, who has spent time teaching in Harlem and in suburban New York schools.

"Our society teaches boys

tactics, misinformation and obfuscation to thwart that historic act in the face of bipartisan support. Those tactics failed then and I'm confident they'll fail again.

A small but determined group of extremists is trying to stand in the way of progress.

We urge Speaker Hastert to schedule an immediate floor vote on the Voting Rights Act reauthorization because it is clear that it enjoys the support of a substantial majority of House lawmakers and is likely to pass overwhelmingly.

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they can either be an athlete a rapper, a player or a pimp," he said. "They need to see the accountants, the lawyers, the bus drivers — every hue of what men can be — boys need to see it."

Smith says the plight of Black males has reached a critical stage. "This situation with our Black male students is so serious, is so critical, so life threatening to us as a race of people that I cannot understand the difficulty of getting African-American adults to be enraged about this, to hold schools more accountable, to hold professionals more accountable, to hold school boards more accountable. This is not something we can allow to continue the way it is," she said.

There are recent signs that elements in the Black community are stepping up to address the crisis.

At its annual music festival in Houston over the weekend, *Essence* magazine announced an "Essence Cares" campaign to address the needs of Black children, especially males. Writing about the campaign on www.essencecares.com, Susan L. Taylor, editorial director of the magazine, said: "Every able Black person must have her or his hand on a challenged youngster's shoulder."

Essence expects the campaign to focus on mentoring, helping improve the plight of children, increasing voter participation and expanding educational opportunities. Among the organizations already signed up as partners in the campaign are: 100 Black Men, Big Brothers and Sisters, the National Urban League, the NAACP, Rainbow/PUSH, National Action Network, the Children's Defense Fund, and the United Negro College Fund.

No group is ignoring what happens in school.

Smith said, "We know that when schools get to a place where they can educate Black boys well that the school is better for all children."