

Obama admin. ‘deeply disappointed’ by Voting Rights ruling, but not backing down

Written by Morgan Whitaker

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President Obama and key officials within his administration allies spoke out against the Supreme Court’s ruling on the Voting Rights Act Tuesday, which functionally suspended protections against voter discrimination, vowing to continue to use the power they have to protect the right to vote in America.

“I am deeply disappointed with the Supreme Court’s decision today,” the president said in a statement released by the White House. “For nearly 50 years, the Voting Rights Act—enacted and repeatedly renewed by wide bipartisan majorities in Congress—has helped secure the right to vote for millions of Americans. Today’s decision invalidating one of its core provisions upsets decades of well-established practices that help make sure voting is fair, especially in places where voting discrimination has been historically prevalent.”

Tuesday’s 5-4 ruling found Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional in its formula that subjects only certain states to pre-clearance of voting or election laws. The president put pressure on Congress to heed the Supreme Court’s advice and pass updated legislation to define which jurisdictions will be covered by pre-clearance in the future.

“[W]hile today’s decision is a setback, it doesn’t represent the end of our efforts to end voting discrimination,” Obama said. “I am calling on Congress to pass legislation to ensure every American has equal access to the polls. My Administration will continue to do everything in its power to ensure a fair and equal voting process.”

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Attorney General Eric Holder, who was the defendant in the case and regularly enforced the pre-clearance provision of the Voting Rights Act as leader of the Justice Department, echoed the president's comments.

"Now, like many others across the country, I am deeply disappointed—deeply disappointed with the court's decision in this matter," Holder said in a press conference called specifically to address the ruling. "This decision represents a serious setback for voting rights and has the potential to negatively affect millions of Americans across the country."

Holder also promised to use the power of the Justice Department to fight against voter suppression wherever it has the jurisdiction.

"The Department of Justice will continue to carefully monitor jurisdictions around the country for voting changes that may hamper voting rights," he said. "Let me be very clear: we will not hesitate to take swift enforcement action—using every legal tool that remains to us—against any jurisdiction that seeks to take advantage of the Supreme Court's ruling by hindering eligible citizens' full and free exercise of the franchise."

"Although today's decision represents a serious and unnecessary setback, the Justice Department remains committed to moving forward in a manner that's consistent with the arc of American history, which has always been a story of increasing equality, inclusion, and access to the franchise," he said. "This is what makes the United States of America truly exceptional. And this is what we will zealously guard."

Vice President Joe Biden also spoke about the ruling during off-the-cuff remarks at an event honoring the 75th anniversary of the Fair Labor Standards Act, where he cited voting rights as "the thing that really got me engaged in politics."

"[T]oday's decision upset a well-established practice," he said, highlight the "overwhelming bipartisan majorities in the Congress" who have voted for it for decades.

"For 17 years I was chairman of or the ranking member of the judiciary," he said. "And every

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time it came up for re-authorization, we got support. If I'm not mistaken, the last time Strom Thurmond voted to reauthorize as well."

The vice president joined civil rights leaders earlier this year to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., where civil rights activists rallied in support of voting rights in the spring of 1965 — the very year the Voting Rights Act passed. Selma is located a short distance from the Shelby County, jurisdiction which served as the plaintiff in the Supreme Court case.

Biden said Tuesday he's determined to work with Congress to get the new version of the legislation passed.

"We're going to work with Congress on this effort, and the administration is going to do everything in our power to ensure fair and equal voting processes are maintained," he said. "So there's a lot of work going to have to be done, but it's nonetheless disappointing that the court made the change, made the decision it did."

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