

Obama should lead fight to revive Voting Rights Act

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson
Tuesday, 02 July 2013 06:24 -



President Barack Obama should lead a forceful drive to revive the Voting Rights Act, which was effectively disemboweled by the Supreme Court's decision last week. All celebrate the 1965 Act as the most consequential civil rights legislation of the past century. Its passage was central to the building of the New South, opening the way to attracting foreign investment in auto factories, creating CNN, hosting the Super Bowl, even electing presidents. One afflicted with a poisoned heart is often blind to its effects. The South learned only after the civil rights legislation that segregation was blighting its own potential.

In 2006, the Congress, after weeks of hearings and thousands of pages of testimony and evidence, overwhelmingly reauthorized the law by a vote of 98-0 in the Senate and 390-33 in the House. Legislators chose to sustain Section 4 that identified which counties and states had a history of discrimination sufficient that changes in voting rights would be subject to prior approval by the Justice Department under Section 5. "Preclearance" not only blocked laws with discriminatory effect, but it also inhibited efforts to suppress the right to vote. But last week, Justice John Roberts, writing for the court in a five-four decision, argued that "our country has changed." He and the activist reactionaries on the court substituted their judgment for that of elected officials and struck down Section 4. Yet, the decision came after an election in which Republicans, particularly in Section 4 states, had pushed harsh restrictions on voting that would make it harder for minorities to vote. When the Miami Heat played the San Antonio Spurs in the NBA finals, the games were rough, but proactive referees kept them from becoming brawls. Justice Roberts' decision, in essence, would pull the referees off the court.

With Republican office holders increasingly worried by the growing numbers of African-American, Latino, Asian-American and other minority voters, measures to curtail voting rights have spread. It is perverse that the chief justice thought this was the time to overrule the congressional judgment.

Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) defended the court's decision, saying that his state had witnessed "tremendous progress" in voting rights. Progress, no doubt, but in 2012 South Carolina passed a discriminatory voting act that was struck down by the courts. David Gergen said he was from North Carolina and "times have changed." Change, yes, but in 2012, North Carolina pushed an aggressive agenda to curtail voting rights, including restrictive voting ID, elimination of early voting on Sunday, a ban on same day voter registration and more. Similar reforms in Texas, blocked by a Section 5 preclearance review, were immediately taken up again when the court's decision came down.

Obama should lead fight to revive Voting Rights Act

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson
Tuesday, 02 July 2013 06:24 -

We need to keep the referees on the court. Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has already pledged hearings to begin reformulating Section 4. Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor said that he hoped the House would find a “responsible way forward.” The president should elevate this issue so that Americans can see who stands for voting rights, and who stands in the way.

Over the past years, the new South has made progress, but that is in large part because the Voting Rights Act put referees on the field to enforce the law. Will Republicans join Democrats in reviving bipartisan support for remedying the Supreme Court’s wrong-headed decision? Or will they use the court’s decision to intensify their efforts to suppress the vote? By pushing hard for action, the president can help re-create the bipartisan support that is vital for our progress as one nation.

Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the work of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org.