

National Urban League: Occupy the Vote

Written by By George E. Curry © TheDefenders
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The National Urban League's annual ["State of Black America"](#) report took a sharp turn this year from what it normally considers the most pressing issues facing African-Americans.

"More than the economy, more than jobs, more than an excellent education, the single issue that arguably stands to have the greatest impact on the future of Black America in 2012 is the vote," wrote Marc H. Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League.

That's quite a statement from the head of an organization famous for its successful job training programs and close working relationship with Fortune 500 companies.

Morial explained: "As Congress wrestles over measures to create jobs and grow the economy, a multi-state effort is underway to exclude those Americans most profoundly affected by the political process."

In his chapter on minority voter participation, Rep. Bobby Scott [D-Va.], quoted the Supreme Court decision in [Wesberry v. Sanders](#): "No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined."

According to Scott, that's exactly what is happening in the months leading up to the November presidential election.

"Unfortunately, the existence of the Voting Rights Act does not deter some from becoming creative in their efforts to reduce voter participation," Scott explained. "One current trend is to require certain voter identification with no or limited exceptions. Currently, 31 states have laws on the books requiring all voters to show forms of identification before voting."

Of those, 15 require photo identification, such as a driver's license. The other 16 require certain non-picture IDs.

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Many, including some Black conservatives, argue that requiring a photo ID has nothing to do with race. However, Scott disagrees.

Quoting a [study](#) conducted by the Brenner Citer for Justice at the New York University School of Law, Scott said, “African Americans are more than three times as likely as Caucasians to lack a government-issued photo ID, with one in four African Americans owning no such ID. Moreover, no convincing evidence exists that says that in-person voter fraud, which is the only type of fraud that photo IDs could prevent, is a meaningful problem.”

The effort to suppress the Black vote extends beyond voter IDs.

“There is also a trend to limit opportunities for voter registration and early voting. Last year, at least five states enacted laws that reduced their early voting periods. Additionally, several states introduced bills to end same-day voter registration and to restrict voter registration mobilization initiatives.”

Scott noted that in the past, poll taxes, literacy tests and other discriminatory schemes were adopted to suppress voting by people of color.

“The [Voting Rights Act](#) dismantled the schemes and barriers to voter participation,” Scott wrote. “As a result, since 1965, the number of black elected officials across the country has increased from just 260 to over 10,500 today. The number of Latinos who now hold public office has increased to 5,850, and the number of minority elected officials continues to rise as well. These numbers demonstrate that the provisions in the Voting Rights Act are effective and also what we stand to lose if voting rights are not protected.”

A key provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act is Section 5 – which is being challenged by some states and conservative groups – requires states with a documented history of discriminatory voting practices to pre-clear any changes in their election laws or practices. In December, the Justice Department blocked South Carolina’s newly-passed voter ID law on the grounds that people of color would be adversely impacted. Scott said he hopes the department will do the same in other states covered by Section 5.

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Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter understands the possible erosion of Black political power as well as anyone. But he said attention must also be placed on self-destructive behavior in the Black community.

“Of 316 people who were murdered in Philadelphia last year, nearly 75% of those killed were black men,” he wrote in the report. “Around 80% of those doing the killing? Black men.” He added, “If the Ku Klux Klan came to Philadelphia and killed almost 300 black men in one year, my city would be on lockdown. The U.S. Justice Department would be called upon. There would be a federal investigation. Congress would hold hearings. And yet, I don’t hear a serious, rational, non-hysterical conversation from anyone addressing this epidemic.”

In its report, the National Urban League offered an 8-point education and employment plan that includes:

- Fair and equitable school funding;
- Robust early childhood education for each child;
- Strengthening high schools and re-engaging potential dropouts;
- Placing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) curriculum in all classrooms;
- Making sure there is a qualified, effective and diverse teaching force;
- Emphasize strategic workforce development targeting Americans most in need;
- Develop new job training models with a placement component and
- Improve and integrate data systems.

Morial feels his best chance of getting that plan adopted will be through what he calls “Occupy the Vote.”

In a speech Wednesday night at Howard University in conjunction with the release of the State of Black America report, he said, “Not only must we vote, we must resist efforts in 2012 to enact these voter suppression laws.”

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