Pictured: NAACP President Ben Jealous vows to protect the ballot

HOUSTON (NNPA) – The NAACP's recently concluded national convention here saw its share of highlights. They included dramatic and powerful addresses by political and civil rights leaders and a host of workshops aimed at empowering members for active participation in the November presidential election. The speech by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney also drew a lot of attention. Though Romney received a polite reception and a standing ovation at the end of his speech, most of the attention focused on the fact that he was booed for promising to eliminate what he called "Obamacare." Romney began, however, by telling NAACP members they would vote for him if they knew his heart.

Vice President Joe Biden, who spoke at the convention the day after Romney, received a rousing reception from the crowd. Biden criticized attacks on the right to vote in the wake of voter suppression efforts in states across the country, and also called for an end to racial profiling.

President Barack Obama appeared via a taped video message that ran before Biden spoke. "I stand on your shoulders and at the NAACP you have always believed in the American promise," Obama said.

Ben Jealous, the NAACP's president and CEO, spoke during the convention's first plenary session. He challenged members to fight back against efforts to suppress their vote.

"In the past year, more states have passed more laws pushing more voters out of the ballot box than at any time since the rise of Jim Crow," Jealous said. "The right to vote is the right upon which the ability to defend all our other rights is leveraged. We will ensure that our nation continues to practice free and fair elections even as we approach the day when people of color will be the majority in this country."

Attorney General Eric Holder also spoke at the convention. With the theme "NAACP: Your Power, Your Decision – Vote" serving as the programmatic backdrop, Holder held nothing back when discussing Texas' new voter ID law, declaring that the edict hurts minorities. He said that party politics, rather than the well-being of the nation, was and remains the driving force behind the Republican-led legislation many view as wanton acts of voter suppression.
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We will not allow political pretext to disenfranchise American citizens of their most precious rights," said Holder, who identified Texas as the "center of our national debate" on voting rights issues.

Holder's remarks came while the federal trial in the nation's capital regarding Texas' 2011 voter ID law witnessed its second day of arguments and testimony. He promised an aggressive fight from the Justice Department to enforce and protect voting rights.

That same day, the NAACP Voting Rights Initiative hosted a mini summit titled "Confronting the Attack on Voting Rights: Stopping Voter Suppression, Breaking Down Barriers, and Expanding our Rights."

William Barber, president of the North Carolina State Conference and NAACP Political Action

and Legislative Committee Chair, led panelists in a discussion on contemporary tactics used to restrict voting rights and new measures needed to combat suppressive efforts. Other mini summit topics included economic development, entrepreneurship and HIV/AIDS in the African-American community.

Convention participants were also treated to a memorable keynote address by NAACP icon and Chairman Emeritus Julian Bond, who added his voice to the chorus of individuals urging active participation in the November election.
The breadth of challenges facing Blacks were listed by Roslyn M. Brock, chairman of the NAACP's National Board of Directors, during the convention's opening mass meeting.

"Today, the enemies of justice are not lynching African Americans and practicing Jim Crow laws of segregation," said Brock. "They are more sophisticated. But they are equally sinister. They are erecting barriers to economic viability, educational quality, health care accessibility, judicial equity, and political opportunity. The opponents of justice are more refined, but they are equally threatening."

Brock added that the iconic civil rights institution's mission remains constant – to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination – but that the organization has developed a new game plan, adapting new strategies to address "this 'new normal' in American society."