

Ballot box battle: Black leaders seek gay support to reauthorize Voting Rights Act

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By Elizabeth A. Perry

A black gay group is urging gay support for reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act now before Congress, citing common interests between racial minorities and gays in the fight for civil rights.

H. Alexander Robinson, director of the National Black Justice Coalition, said the gains of the African-American civil rights movement have benefited gays, and now it is time to return the favor.

"It is a travesty that the GLBT movement has not been more engaged on this issue," said Robinson. "The same forces that would speak up against full freedom in the workplace and marriage equality are the same people, the same institutions who are challenging the need for the Voting Rights Act and its enforcement."

The NBJC is working with the Black Leadership Forum in the push for reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act, set to expire in 2007. The act was originally written in 1965 to enforce fair voting practices for black voters and other racial and ethnic minorities in all states.

Dr. Joe Leonard Jr., executive director of the Black Leadership Forum, said all people should support reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act because everyone is impacted by it.

"Prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, there was not a single female senator or congressperson of African-American descent," he said.

Today's congressional demographics reflect a record number of women and minorities in political office, according Library of Congress figures. A total of 84 women, 43 African Americans, 29 Hispanic Americans and 8 Asian Pacific Americans are serving in the House and Senate.

Of these totals, there are 69 women in the House and 14 in the Senate. There are 42 African Americans in the House and Barack Obama, a Democrat, is the only African American in the Senate.

There are three openly gay members of Congress, all in the House.

A vote in the House on reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act was put off for three weeks after Southern Republicans voiced concern over certain provisions. Nearly 80 Republicans signed a letter protesting the provision that requires multilingual ballots and monitoring of elections in Southern states.

The House reconvened for a vote on the measure on July 13, with a 390-33 majority vote in favor of reauthorization. The matter will go to the Senate, where a vote is expected by the end of the month. Republican leadership in both houses of Congress favors reauthorization.

"The Voting Rights Act is one of the most successful pieces of legislation we have ever had," Robinson said. "It is through the Voting Rights Act and its enforcement that we have broken down barriers and realized the rights of African Americans and other racial minorities."

The Human Rights Campaign has joined in the effort, writing members of Congress to ask for their support for reauthorization. The National Gay & Lesbian Task Force has not worked on the VRA reauthorization, although both the

Task Force and HRC are members of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a broad-based coalition of civil rights groups active in the Voting Rights Act.