



FALL 2020

Voter Suppression in the Midst of COVID-19

By Christian Brooks, *Associate for Domestic Issues*

As the 2020 presidential election quickly approaches, it is more critical than ever that we take action to reclaim the values and promise of our electoral process. Since a 2013 Supreme Court ruling gutted the Voting Rights Act, voter suppression has been on the rise and has denied voting rights to millions, particularly Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). The impacts of COVID-19 will further exacerbate voter suppression.

It was not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) that many Black Americans were able to register to vote and participate in the democratic process. Prior to the VRA, states used literacy tests, poll taxes, moral character tests and grandfather clauses to deter Black people from voting. Combined with efforts of white Americans, such as threats of violence, beatings, lynchings, and the loss of property and jobs, these measures kept many Black Americans off the voting rolls.

The VRA provided federal enforcement of voting rights and created mechanisms of oversight for states and localities with a history of voter suppression. After the passage of the VRA, the number of eligible Black voters registered rose by 61%, according to the Library of Congress. This was a pivotal step toward equality for Black Americans. However, its gains have been virtually halted.

On June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act, which identified



Lyndon B. Johnson 36th President of the United States of America signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965

which states and counties were subject to a preclearance requirement based on their historical use of suppressive tactics, was unconstitutional. The preclearance requirement mandated jurisdictions with a history of voter suppression to seek preapproval from the Department of Justice before passing or changing voting laws. Removing the preclearance requirement took away the federal government's authority for enforcement and oversight, leaving millions of citizens of color vulnerable to voter suppression.

Since this ruling, many states have passed extremely restrictive voting laws. Among these are restrictive voter ID requirements, voter purges, proof

of citizenship, restrictions on voter registration, and unduly limiting early and absentee voting opportunities. A number of these tactics were used in the 2018 Georgia midterm election, a historical election where Stacey Abrams sought to become the first Black female governor in the United States. Voter suppression and disenfranchisement will only continue as COVID-19 continues to ravage the country. The 2020 Wisconsin and Georgia primaries are proof of that.

Though many states have implemented measures such as early voting and mail-in voting to make voting easier amid COVID-19, BIPOC are

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Voter Suppression

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still at a disadvantage. Voting by mail has historically been an issue for Black, Indigenous and People of Color. For example, many indigenous voters live on tribal lands that lack residential addresses and reliable postal infrastructure. BIPOC are overrepresented in the homeless population and, therefore, do not have access to residential addresses needed for “stress-free” mail-in voting. Though early voting is available, the number of in-person early voting locations is limited. Without access to reliable transportation, one cannot

easily access an early voting location and cannot take advantage of this option.

This system of racism and voter suppression was in place long before COVID-19. Without addressing the racist structures in place, the COVID-19 response will not mitigate the effects of the discriminatory voting system. Black, Indigenous and People of Color will not be able to fully benefit from early voting and voting by mail. We must address historic issues of systemic racism and voter suppression so that all people can exercise their right to vote.

In 2008, in the policy *Lift Every Voice*, the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirmed that “to deny anyone a fair vote is a sin.” Denying equitable and safe access to voting is a sin and fundamentally goes against our Reformed Christian beliefs. Every person has inherent worth and value and deserves an equal voice in our democratic system. As people of faith, it is our collective call and responsibility to fight against structures of oppression and systemic racism and ensure equitable access to voting for all.





DISASTER TO DISASTER:

How Climate Change is Displacing Vulnerable Populations

By Hannah Graunke, *Office of Public Witness Summer Fellow*

An alarming 2018 World Bank study reported that over 143 million people could be displaced by 2050 due to climate change if we do not make significant efforts to curb carbon emissions. Low crop yield, extreme weather events, freshwater contamination and rising sea levels are already making portions of the globe uninhabitable. In 2019 alone, weather disasters intensified by global climate change displaced an estimated 24.9 million people across 140 countries and territories. Unfortunately, international refugee laws do not specifically address climate displacement, leaving the millions of people displaced by climate change without international assistance. The United States has contributed largely to climate change; we single-handedly produce a quarter of all carbon emissions. It is, therefore, our responsibility to accept into our

nation those seeking refuge after their homelands have been rendered uninhabitable by climate change.

The poorest countries contribute less than 1% of total emissions, yet they most acutely face the effects of climate change. This is especially true as we see the slow-onset consequences of our industrialization. For example, many experts point to extreme droughts in Syria as one of the main causes of the recent war. Many of the refugees who fled Syria were escaping not just conflict, but water insecurity. Unpredictable changes to the rainy season have led to droughts and floods, causing high food insecurity and migration in sub-Saharan Africa, where roughly 70% of the population depends on subsistence farming. In Tuvalu, almost 10% of total human movement between 2005–15 was attributed to changing environmental conditions, including worsening water quality, sea level rise and droughts.

Unfortunately, international refugee laws are ill-equipped to support people displaced by climate change. Despite international recognition that climate change is causing mass displacement, climate displacement does not fall under an internationally recognized refugee category. This prevents the people affected by climate change from receiving international assistance and protections.

On Sept. 26, 2019, Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) introduced to the Senate bill S. 2565 “to establish a Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy, to authorize the admission of climate-displaced

persons, and for other purposes.”

This bill would create a “global climate resilience strategy,” which would create a humanitarian program that would give the same rights and benefits to people displaced by climate change as afforded to refugees. Though a potential step in the right direction, this legislation has stalled in the Committee on Foreign Relations since its introduction.

While the committee debates this legislation, millions of people continue to watch their homeland turn to wasteland without hope of international assistance. Ignoring the gross inequities of climate displacement is to deliberately turn a blind eye to people we are called to love and protect. The Belhar Confessions remind us to “stand by people in any form of suffering and need [and that] the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.” If we are to live by this confession, then we have a responsibility to care for the most vulnerable of God’s Creation, nature and humanity alike. As citizens of a wealthy nation that is the main contributor to climate change, we have a duty to welcome and protect those whose displacement we have directly caused. For “if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17, NIV).

Here in the United States, we have the resources to help our siblings who are in need. We are one of the largest polluters on the planet, and the poorest populations suffer as a result. If we truly want to live as Christ lived, we should be opening our doors to those in need. Recognizing our own complicity in the displacement of our siblings across the world, we must actively advocate for legislation that will give legal protections to those fleeing the negative consequences of climate change.





The Case for Defunding the Police

By Christian Brooks, *Associate for Domestic Issues*
and Lloyd Davis, *Office of Public Witness Summer Fellow*



Policing in America is a 182-year-old-institution with the mantra “to protect and serve.” Unfortunately, that protection has not extended to all Americans. Over the past few decades, police have been caught on camera beating, and in many cases, killing Black people. The recent recording of George Floyd’s gruesome murder sparked outrage and protests around the world. Floyd’s murder shined a light on the police violence the African American community has experienced for years. For many, it generated conversations about defunding the police.

To understand the necessity of defunding the police, one must first examine the history of law enforcement. Policing in the U.S. has a past rooted in white supremacy. In the early 19th century, southern states created slave patrols as an early form of policing. Slave patrols were tasked with capturing runaway enslaved people and preventing revolts, to preserve the system of slavery. Racialized policing continued after the end of slavery in 1865 as “Black Codes,” enforced by all-white police forces, restricted the liberties of African Americans. Policing during the Jim Crow era, between 1877–1965, utilized methods that included racial profiling, over-policing, intimidation, harassment and violence. These methods of policing continue.

In response, the House of Representatives passed the Justice in Policing Act on June 25, 2020, which seeks to “hold law enforcement accountable for misconduct and reform police training and policies.” While this bill is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough to undo the inherently discriminatory practices that have been in place since policing was founded. For decades, activists have called for defunding

police departments. Defunding the police means reallocating funds to other important but underfunded programs and institutions such as social welfare programs, schools, mental health services or other community resources. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, people with a mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement. Mental health professionals are far more equipped to handle those situations.

A 2017 study by the Center for Popular Democracy determined that police funding consumes 20% to 45% of cities’ budgets. As we have seen with the recent protests, taxpayer dollars are going toward riot gear, tear gas, heavily armored vehicles and rubber bullets. However, in these same communities, public school teachers spend nearly \$500 a year of their own money to buy school supplies for students, according to a 2018 Department of Education survey. Reallocated funds will give communities the resources they need most, which in turn will reduce crime and decrease instances of police violence. A 2015 study by the Urban Health Lab found that rehabbing abandoned housing units led to a significant drop in crime rates, gun assaults and nuisance misdemeanors in Philadelphia.

The call to combat systemic racism is one of the most prominent callings of our lifetime. In 2016, the 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called for a rejection of racism and white supremacy “in its myriad of forms.” The General Assembly affirmed that “Christians align ourselves with love and not hate, both a rejection of racism and a positive proclamation that God delights in Black lives.”



Boycott: An Act of Christian Witness

By Meg Wilder, *Office of Public Witness Summer Fellow*

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was a protester. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus stood up in the synagogue and spoke against the injustices of society. Putting his safety at risk, he boldly proclaimed the release of prisoners, sight for the blind, relief for the poor and freedom for the oppressed. Throughout his life, Jesus protested the status quo and created a movement based on justice, hope and love. As the Body of Christ on Earth today, we are called to do just as Jesus did: protest hatred and oppression, and fight for justice.



Unfortunately, today, the right to boycott and protest is in peril. Since 2014, over 100 measures targeting boycotts and other advocacy for Palestinian rights have been introduced in U.S. federal, state and local legislatures. The boycott of Israeli

settlement products arose out of a deep concern for injustice perpetrated by the occupation of Palestinian territories. The U.N. has repeatedly expressed that growing Israeli settlements are illegal under international law. Such settlements threaten the economic and political livelihood of Palestinians and serve as one stumbling block to a viable Palestinian economy. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and many other organizations have called for the use of economic pressures to challenge this injustice and oppression. However, state, local and federal politicians have passed laws intended to suppress the grassroots boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian rights.

Palestine Legal, an independent civil rights organization, reports that, to date, 30 states have adopted anti-boycott laws, including five executive orders issued by governors. In January 2019, the U.S. Senate passed the Combating BDS Act (CBA), an anti-boycott bill intended to stop economic protest in support of Palestinian rights. In response to this bill, the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA), said the bill “threatens the Constitutionally protected right of Americans to engage in boycotts in support of human rights causes.” While the House of Representatives has not taken up the bill, by passing the CBA, the Senate sent a clear message that the right to boycott is not protected for those advocating for justice in Israel/Palestine.

Numerous faith and civil liberties groups such as the PC(USA) and the American Civil Liberties Union have condemned these measures as infringements upon the First Amendment right to free speech. Because of their unconstitutionality, activists in several states have successfully

defeated anti-boycott legislation. However, according to Foreign Policy magazine, “these laws have created a chilling effect on companies, which typically say that their hands are tied when it comes to exiting occupied territory.” Such legislation therefore perpetuates an unequal and unjust economic system in the Palestinian Territories.

Throughout our history, the Presbyterian Church has employed boycotts and protests as a way to bear witness to our Christian faith. In recent years, the PC(USA) General Assembly has approved policies to divest from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestine. PC(USA) policy also affirms boycotting products made on Israeli settlements, which are built on Palestinian land in violation of their human rights and international law. The Presbyterian Mission Agency views economic protest as an effective means to spurring social change, from strengthening labor rights for farmworkers to ending apartheid in South Africa. The church’s use of economic protest reflects its theological commitment to opposing injustice through nonviolent means. We must continue to defend our right to oppose oppression through protests and boycott. Our Palestinian siblings need us. Palestinian labor and land are being exploited. These unjust practices must cease. The Gospel of Luke teaches us, Jesus came to earth to challenge unjust authorities and set free those who are oppressed. We must do the same and live into God’s vision for a just world.

To learn more about how you can defend your First Amendment rights and speak out against anti-boycott legislation, visit righttoboycott.com.



Congressman remembers Rep. John Lewis in talk with Office of Public Witness

By Rich Copley, *Presbyterian News Service*



Rep. David Price of North Carolina covered many topics in online interview with Office of Public Witness

Congressman David Price (D-North Carolina) entered the U.S. House of Representatives in 1987, the same year as another Southern Congressman, Rep. John Lewis (D-Georgia).

“Of course, I knew about John Lewis a long time before I came to the Congress,” Price recalled during an interview with the Rev. Jimmie Hawkins of the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness. “We knew right away that John was the celebrity in our group, because when any news media or the public was around ... John was the one who had the star power.”

Lewis, of course, came to Congress as a hero of the Civil Rights Movement, putting his body on the line numerous times for arrests and beatings at the hands of police officers and white supremacists, and earning many distinctions, including as the youngest speaker at the historic March on Washington in 1963.

Lewis died at age 80 on July 17 following a six-month battle with cancer. He was the first Black lawmaker to lie in state in the U.S. Capitol rotunda before being eulogized by former President Barack Obama and remembered by former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton and by many others.

In Congress, Price said Lewis became “a treasured colleague and friend,” but the legend was never far away.

“You don’t sum up the man and his greatness simply in his work as a legislator, as important as that is,” Price said.

“John was always ready to talk about the Movement, and by that he meant, not just the history, but the present meaning of the Movement, and the need to keep pushing forward. I witnessed that so many times.”

— Rep. David Price

One of those moments was in 2016, when Lewis led a dramatic sit-in on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives to force a vote on gun control.

“We couldn’t get anything on the floor, even for a vote,” Price recalled of efforts to introduce legislation after numerous mass-shooting tragedies. “The other party was in leadership at that point, so we did this unprecedented thing of having a sit-in on the floor.

“It made an enormous difference to have John be a part of that. It bore witness to the continuity of what he stood for all his life and this cause. ... I promise you, the House leadership was going to be really careful about evicting a sit-in if John Lewis was in the middle of it. It gave them pause, and it should have

In the August conversation, properly socially distanced on Zoom, Price and Hawkins discussed current events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the uprising for police reform and against systemic racism following several police and police-related killings of Black individuals, and the upcoming presidential election.

“These are extraordinary times,” Price said.

With the passing of Lewis, Price said voting rights are very much at the forefront of many legislators’ minds, particularly the restoration of protections in the 1965 Voting Rights Act that were struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013, when the court ruled that states and local governments with a history of voter discrimination no longer had to submit to pre-clearance to change voting rules. Price called it “the most clueless Supreme Court decision” in history and said, “We’ve got to fix it.”

In 2019, the House passed the Voting Rights Advancement Act, which has since been renamed to honor Lewis. So far, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) has refused to bring the bill up in the Senate. Price said passage of the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act is one of the most important things Congress can do and would be a fitting tribute to his friend and colleague.

“That’s a fond dream of mine, and many of my colleagues,” Price said, “to pass the voting rights bill and name it for John, because he fought so hard for it.”



**“To do righteousness and justice
is more acceptable to the
Lord than sacrifice.”**

Proverbs 21:3



AUGUST 24-30, 2020

**PRESBYTERIAN
WEEK OF ACTION**

It is abundantly clear through the gospel narrative and the greater witness of the Bible, that God has called us, as people of faith, to seek justice for those most marginalized in our world. **As a Matthew 25 denomination**, it is the vision of our church to **eradicate white supremacy** and **dismantle institutionalized racism**. Furthermore, in an effort to do the “hands & feet” work the Lord ordains, we must act and bear witness to the gospel in these crucial times.

On **August 24th-28**, the national staff hosted the **Presbyterian Week of Action**. This endeavor provided a public witness that facilitated education, visibility and action that reinforced our PC(USA) statements and policy around the support of eradicating racism and acknowledging that **God loves all Black lives**. To view recordings and resources from the Presbyterian Week of Action please visit **pcusa.org/weekofaction**.

“To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.”
— Proverbs 21:3

“God sends the Church to work for justice in the world: exercising its power for the common good; dealing honestly in personal and public spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people...”
— Book of Order, W-5.0304



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