

“Remembering Julian Bond and the Voting Act of 1965”

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It is important to bring to center stage those who have contributed so much to the advancement of building unity in this country around the issues that affect our communities. Julian Bond was one who knew how to take up the issues of the African American community (such as racial profiling, incarceration, and segregation) while building coalitions of people from all colors, genders, and sexual orientations – to build a more just, equal, and democratic society. Julian Bond was a scholar at Morehouse College in Atlanta – but he did not just theorize or write or teach – but turned his theories and his learning into organizing as a social activist and leader in the 1960’s in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was an example of one who, not only fought to ensure the enfranchisement of our communities, but he turned voting power into being an example of a community-based organizer who got elected to the Georgia House of Representatives and the State Senate, to the chairmanship of the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center – and never lost his principles and values – or his connections with the communities who helped elect him. It was when Julian Bond was in the Georgia House of Representatives, in 1970, and I was Student Body Vice President at the University of Colorado – that I met Julian Bond. We invited him to speak on the campus – and I was honored to have dinner with him before he spoke. This was one of those moments that touched my life – and was part of making who I am today.

This was a time when Julian Bond was a symbol of the election of eleven African Americans in the Georgia House of Representatives as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He was an example of the voter registration and voter turn-out efforts – that he personally had helped to organize – to end the disenfranchisement of African Americans – and end the discriminatory practices which systematically excluded them from being able to vote. This was a time when I, and ten thousand other students, voted – at the University of Colorado to go on strike in protest of the Viet Nam War. He reminded us that evening that on

January 10, 1966 – the Georgia State representatives had voted 184 – 12 to not allow him to take his rightful seat in the House of Representatives (when he had been voted in) because of his public support of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s position opposing U. S. involvement in the Viet Nam war. Imagine – Julian Bond took this position in 1966 – when it was at all not popular to take such a position. It took a decision by a United State District Court to rule that this exclusion was unconstitutional and ensure his position in the Georgia House of Representatives.

A good way to remember Julian Bond is to continue the efforts that he led in support of our diverse communities – in support of the disenfranchised.

The reality is that the demographics of the largest twenty cities – today -- are now majority Black, Brown, and Asian. In New York City, three-fifths of those residing in the city are foreign born with the majority not being able to vote. And these immigrants do contribute much to the economy and they do pay taxes. A 50-state study, *Undocumented Immigrants’ State and Local Tax Contributions*, by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy shows that they collectively **paid \$11.84 billion** in state and local taxes and that their legalization would lead to an additional \$1.4 trillion as a stimulus to the economy. This means that the places where immigrants live are highly overrepresented and are structurally excluded. This is also true for other historically excluded groups

This is a time when Mass deportations and mass incarcerations expanding to unconscionable levels in recent years – leading to separation of families – children left without parents – poverty, unemployment, homelessness – in our communities. Our prison population has exploded from about 300,000 to more than 2 million in a few decades. The majority of those incarcerated are black and brown. There are more African Americans under correctional control today -- in prison or jail, on probation or parole -- than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began. And these realities are connected to the right to vote. As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race.

These realities come at a time when there are a record number of Latino and Asian voters that have become the country's fastest-growing voting blocs and have formed coalitions with African Americans, Native Americans, and progressive white voters to change the political landscape.

Alongside Deportation and Incarceration – as well as increased enforcement – as part of ongoing efforts to stop the growing political power of our diverse communities – is a case before the Supreme Court that could redefine “one person, one vote” and voting rights law. This case, *Evenwel vs. Abbott*, is aimed at changing how electoral districts are drawn across the country (revamping who comprises electoral districts) and reshaping who is ultimately represented by elected officials. The challengers in the Texas case, represented by the conservative legal group Project on Fair Representation, argues that the practice of drawing Congressional districts should no longer use total population from census figures as a marker for creating electoral districts – but that it should exclude those ineligible to vote, such as undocumented immigrants, felons, and young people below the voting age.

What this would mean – is that in areas where there are a large number of these groups – those districts would get diluted representation – because the districts would now be drawn just on the basis of the numbers of voters and not based on the total population. Again, this is another example of cutting back on the growing political power of our diverse communities – and the potential of the political strength of the diverse people of color, women, LGBTQ, labor, faith-based, and community-based coalitions – that have manifested themselves more than ever in recent years.

It is important to understand the foundations of these efforts to disenfranchise our diverse communities -- as having a foundation in the successful organizing in recent years, in advancing the legacy of Julian Bond - in the development of broad multi-racial coalitions, and our growing political strength. In this context, it is important to not react to these attacks, to not be afraid – to not be passive –but to do as now has become our tradition – to organize as we always have – to vote with our feet, with our hands, and with our minds – to unite around our common efforts to have resources channeled for jobs, health, education and quality of life – to support efforts for simplifying voter registration – to get out the vote – to support candidates who support our communities – to hold those that are elected accountable -- to not let them scapegoat us – to not

let them divide us – but to respond with creative alternatives that can move us forward in implementing our vision for a more just, equal, and humane society.