

Malloy, NAACP celebrate 50th anniversary of federal Voting Rights Act

By Ken Dixon

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Gov. Dannel P. Malloy speaks Thursday during a ceremony at the Bridgeport Holiday Inn to mark the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Photo: Autumn Driscoll / Hearst Connecticut Media

BRIDGEPORT — Gov. Dannel P. Malloy on Thursday praised a federal court ruling that struck down an identification law in Texas that has made it harder for Hispanics and African-Americans to vote.

Speaking in Bridgeport before more than 200 people gathered for an NAACP luncheon commemorating the 50th anniversary of the federal Voting Rights Act, Malloy said Republican-run states are systematically redrawing election districts that favor their continued control of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the process, the GOP is making it harder for minority voters, particularly those who do not have drivers licenses, including urban dwellers and the elderly, Malloy told the Greater Bridgeport NAACP branch's luncheon, in the Holiday Inn.

"This is a battle that we're still engaged in," Malloy, incoming chairman of the Democratic Governors Association, said of the landmark 1965 voting law. "There are people in this nation who would deny the right to vote to others. We have to be cognizant of that. We have to fight that. No one should have to have, in my opinion, a photo ID. In the state of Texas, some people would have to drive four or five hours for that photo ID just to vote and it should not be necessary to do it."

He noted that Republican-run states including Texas, South Carolina and North Carolina have drastically changed their ID rules.

Gerrymandering accusations

"We have to be on our feet, we have to be walking and talking and making sure that everyone in this nation is interested in seeing every one of their fellow citizens vote as humanly possible," Malloy said. "And the charade that has been played in this country, pretending that somehow and some way we are overrun with illegal voting, is simply untrue."

He said that while voter rights are protected in Connecticut and steps are being taken to make it easier to cast ballots in the state, the broader national issue is the gerrymandering of congressional districts to lessen the political power of minority communities.

"What's going on in this country is a permanent, long-term realignment of the Congress of the United States based on the election returns of 2010," Malloy said of the Republican gains. "What we saw time and time and time again is the desire to dilute the impact of the black and Hispanic vote in many, many states across the country, which have an almost-guaranteed Republican Party 21- or 22-vote majority. We cannot allow that to happen after the next Census."

J.R. Romano, chairman of the Republican State Central Committee, said Thursday that over the decades, Democrats have not been friends to minorities.

"When it comes to minorities who have consistently voted for Democrats the last 50 years, it hasn't gone well for them, especially in cities like Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven," he said. "Failing schools, violent crime and a lack of employment opportunity has been the staple for cities."

Romano noted that voter turnout in the cities tend to be the lowest in the state.

Thursday's event — which included U.S. Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy, both D-Conn., Mayor Bill Finch, and a handful of Finch's opponents — was a proud one

for Bridgeport's once-troubled NAACP, which recently reorganized under after a state takeover.

New President George Mintz told the crowd that the organization's goal is to get 25,000 "souls to the polls" this campaign season, which includes a September Democratic primary and November's general election.

Finch, who is battling for the city's influential minority vote with ex-Mayor Joseph Ganim, said he was 9 when the Voting Rights Act was signed.

A call for cooperation

Finch addressed his failed attempt a few years ago to, with Malloy's help, make Bridgeport's elected school board an appointed one — a move that continues to hurt him among some constituents.

"When it comes to ensuring everyone has a voice in our democracy, we've had some missteps and learned some tough lessons," Finch said.

He noted his administration is working on previously announced municipal IDs for undocumented residents.

"Once this municipal ID program is up and running," Finch said, "I plan on working closely with state and local officials to pass a legislative fix that will allow for non-citizens who are legally documented residents to vote in municipal elections."

Mintz, during his closing remarks, acknowledged the various mayoral candidates in the room and asked all those factions to work together for Bridgeport's future.

"If this table is for Candidate 1, this table for Candidate 2 and this table for Candidate 3, that should not stop you from talking," Mintz said.

Staff Writer Brian Lockhart contributed to this report

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