



Bruce Elfant, Travis County Tax Assessor-Collector and Voter Registrar

News Release

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Honoring voter registration volunteers Jan. 15

Voting rights event kicks off 50th anniversary of Voting Rights Act

Austin, TX – Travis County’s voter registration volunteers will kick off the 50th anniversary year of the Voting Rights Act, the landmark legislation championed by President Lyndon B. Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to end racial discrimination at the polls, at 2 p.m., Thursday, Jan. 15, at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, 2313 Red River St.

Jan. 15 is King’s birthday, and history will be made in the LBJ Library auditorium when the recorded conversation between Johnson and King strategizing on the Voting Rights Act is played a half-century to the day on which it occurred.

“It is a great honor for our Volunteer Deputy Registrars to usher in this anniversary year, hear the conversation, see footage from that time, and to once again dedicate themselves to registering voters,” said Bruce Elfant, the Travis County tax assessor-collector and voter registrar. Elfant will mass deputize more than 400 registration volunteers and present awards to 40 volunteers, each of whom registered 100 or more voters in 2014 and 12 organizations for outstanding voter registration efforts.

Travis County has more than 4,000 Volunteer Deputy Registrars, who speak 61 different languages and represent 252 civic, religious and political organizations. Elfant said he appreciates that the LBJ Library is allowing Travis County to represent the diversity of the nation as a whole.

“Registering voters and exercising the right to vote gives a voice to all Americans despite, race, gender, social-economic circumstances, religion or sexual orientation,” Elfant said. “Each vote at the polls carries equal weight and provides equal opportunity for every citizen to make a difference in our country.”

But it wasn’t always that way. Women weren’t given the right to vote until 1920. African Americans, mostly in Southern states, were often blocked from voting by poll taxes, literacy tests and other methods, including the use of violence, until the 1965 Voting Rights Act provided enhanced protections prohibiting the denial or abridgment of the right to vote on account of race or color and placed Southern states’ voting policies and procedures, including Texas, under the scrutiny of the federal government.

That key provision of the Voting Rights Act was overturned by a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision that released these states from federal oversight of their election activities.

It put the Voting Rights Act back in the news as opponents of the Supreme Court decision claim new state laws, such as Texas' voter identification law, are designed to keep minorities, the poor and elderly from voting.

March 7 marks the 50th anniversary of the marches led by King from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., calling for new voting rights laws. On that "Bloody Sunday," the 600 marchers were attacked and beaten by police, an act that shocked the nation.

"LBJ ultimately used the crisis of Selma to compel reluctant lawmakers to pass the Voting Rights Act, which he signed on Aug. 6, 1965, and considered his greatest legislative triumph," noted Mark Updegrove, the LBJ Library director. "The partnership between LBJ and MLK on civil rights is one of the most productive and consequential in American history."

Despite the passage of the sweeping Civils Right Act a year earlier, many scholars consider the Voting Rights Act the most effective civil rights legislation because it gave minorities the power to impact change through the political process.

Updegrove will open the Voting Rights Act anniversary event, playing the Johnson-King telephone conversation and showing video of Johnson urging Congress to pass the act.

One thing for which there is no dispute is that nationally the number of people going to the polls is in decline. This major anniversary of the Voting Rights Act could not come at a better time, said Regina Lawrence, director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas-Austin, and a featured speaker at Thursday's event.

"At a time when too many potential voters sit on the sidelines, we need to be reminded of the crucial importance of democracy's most fundamental right," Lawrence said. "The Strauss Institute is delighted to take part in this event honoring both the legacy of the Voting Rights Act and these dedicated Volunteer Deputy Registrars."

It is often easy to lose touch with history, Elfant said, adding it's important to never forget people lost their lives fighting for equal access to the ballot box. Those who volunteer to register voters today are carrying on the legacy of those before them, including the Freedom Fighters.

"They are a continuation of the Freedom Fighters, some of whom gave their lives battling racial discrimination in the '60s to register African-American voters in the South," Elfant said. "Volunteer Deputy Registrars do not ask for your party affiliation or non-affiliation, don't care what color you are or how much money you make - they give their personal time so their fellow citizens have the opportunity to register and vote how they see fit in city, county, state and national elections."

Travis County will register voters at the LBJ Library on Aug. 6, 2015 to commemorate Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act.