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Demonstrators in Atlanta gather outside the Georgia State Capitol March 1 to protest H.B. 531, passed by the Georgia House to restrict ballot drop boxes, require more I.D. for absentee voting and limit weekend early voting days passed. (CNS/Reuters/Dustin Chambers)



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Local Catholic bishops' conferences in Georgia, Florida and Texas have chosen not to speak out or take positions on the "election integrity" bills that their states' Republican-controlled legislatures passed this year to impose new voting restrictions, which civil rights organizations say target Black and minority communities.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has also declined to directly address nationwide changes to voting rights as at least 18 states enacted 30 laws to restrict access to the vote between Jan. 1 and July 14, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. Those laws make mail-in voting and early voting at drop boxes more difficult, impose stricter voter ID requirements and make faulty voter purges more likely.

"The silence is very noticeable, and it's sad and disappointing," said Sr. Anita Baird, a member of the Religious Congregation of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary who serves on the board of directors for the National Black Sisters' Conference.

State legislatures in Georgia and Florida passed and Republican governors in both states signed controversial broad omnibus bills that the Brennan Center and civil rights groups like the NAACP describe as voter suppression laws.

In Texas, two similar voting restriction bills have been introduced in a special session of the state legislature, but House Democrats have fled the state to deprive their chamber of the quorum required to pass legislation.

In May, the National Black Sisters' Conference issued a joint statement with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious defending the right of all citizens to vote. The sisters also called on Congress to take up legislation to protect voting rights, such as the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, and called out elected officials "at every level who continue to introduce measures that would return us to the era of Jim Crow."



Women religious and laypeople attend a rally at the Sisters of St. Joseph motherhouse in Brentwood, New York, July 26, urging U.S. Congress to pass the voting-rights For the People Act. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"This should be an issue that would be very easy for the bishops collectively to issue a very strong statement on the sanctity and the right to vote, and the responsibility we all have to ensure that every citizen's voice is heard," Baird told NCR.

Instead of challenging Republican lawmakers and conservative lobbyists who have led the charge to tighten voting regulations on questionable grounds that the 2020 presidential election was marred by fraud, the bishops have widely opted for a nonconfrontational posture — either remaining silent or issuing general statements reiterating official Catholic support for voting rights without mentioning the recent

bills.

The Catholic bishops have not joined leaders of other Christian denominations and faith traditions who have spoken out and mobilized against the new state voting laws. On Aug. 12, dozens of interfaith leaders and state legislators spoke outside the U.S. Supreme Court to call on federal lawmakers to secure voting rights and end the filibuster, the threat of which Senate Republicans utilized in June to block debate on the For the People Act, Democrats' voting rights and campaign finance reform bill. The interfaith leaders also marched to the U.S. Capitol with signed letters to present to lawmakers. No Catholic bishops participated in the march.

A group called "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival" organized the event. The organization and its recent push for voting rights has received support from the Sisters of Mercy and Pax Christi in addition to Catholic Peace Fellowship, Franciscan Action Network, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, Nuns and Nones, and a host of lay Catholics, according to the Rev. Kazimir Brown, the national director of religious affairs for Repairers of the Breach and co-lead of the national faith partners for the Poor People's Campaign.

On June 24, the chairmen of two U.S. bishops' committees sent a letter to congressional lawmakers urging them to ensure "the right to vote is available to all citizens in our democratic society." However, the bishops took no position on any federal legislation and did not mention new laws that restrict voting access in states like Georgia and Florida.

Fr. Bruce Wilkinson, a priest of the Atlanta Archdiocese who is retired from active ministry, told NCR that "as a Black man, it doesn't surprise me. But as a Catholic, it really disappoints me."

The typical response from the Atlanta Archdiocese to previous concerns raised by him and others regarding issues of racial injustice has been silence, he said.

"When all these things happen, like voter suppression, which has been a very big issue, especially in the Black Catholic community, there's silence," Wilkinson said.

A spokeswoman for the Atlanta Archdiocese told NCR in an email that the archdiocese was "not interested in participating" in this story.

The Georgia Catholic Conference, which acts as the public policy arm for the state's bishops, did not take a position or comment on the passage of the Election Integrity Act of 2021, which Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law on March 25. In addition to provisions that tighten restrictions on drop boxes, voter IDs and absentee ballots, the Georgia law prohibits volunteers from handing out food and water to people waiting in line to vote. The law also enables the state legislature to take more direct control over the ballot counting in Democratic-majority areas.

Two months before the law's passage, Francis Mulcahy, the executive director of the Georgia Catholic Conference, told The Georgia Bulletin, newspaper for the Atlanta Archdiocese, that the local church would defend voting rights as a key feature of Catholic social teaching in the upcoming legislative session.*



People in Atlanta listen a speech June 21 during a stop on the Black Voters Matter organization's Freedom Ride for Voting Rights. The voter outreach tour was making stops in several Southern states on its way to Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Dustin Chambers)

"We would be opposed to any restriction on voting rights," Mulcahy said in January. "Exactly how that will play out in legislation and what we will do about it will depend on what comes out in the legislation."

But when organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the League of Women Voters of Georgia and the American Civil Liberties Union filed legal challenges and accused the state's Republican lawmakers of crafting legislation designed to suppress voters in Black-majority districts, the Georgia Catholic Conference did not join the challenges.

Mulcahy did not return messages from NCR seeking comment.

"The bishops are silent. The only life issue they want to talk about is abortion and contraception," said Thabo Bailey Hall, a Black Catholic woman who lives in Savannah, Georgia, with her husband and five children.

Hall, a realtor who is involved in diocesan marriage ministry, told NCR that she found offensive some of the arguments made to justify the state's "election integrity" law, especially the suggestion that passing out water bottles to people waiting in line could influence their vote.

"It was never about that bottle of water," said Hall, arguing that that provision was obviously targeted at voters in Black-majority districts who often have to wait in long lines because of fewer polling stations in their neighborhoods.

Hall said she was not surprised with the bishops' silence on voting rights.

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"Right now, the people who run the church are in protect-the-institution mode, and for them, the institution is white and moneyed," Hall said. "They have to tiptoe. They have to be careful, they have to watch what they say, because they don't want to alienate, as they see it, too quickly or too much, the source of the wealth, the funding of the church, and that's just the reality."

As NCR has previously reported, major Catholic philanthropists and pro-life leaders have bankrolled and spearheaded voter suppression efforts in conservative-leaning

states since Donald Trump's defeat last November to Joe Biden, a Democrat. Trump has attributed Biden's victory to baseless claims of widespread voter fraud that helped fuel the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and that have helped provide a shaky foundation for Republicans' election integrity push.

"You can't separate out the insurrection and how much it got soft-pedaled by Republicans from why we are now seeing these laws," said Gunnar Gundersen, a co-founder of Black Catholic Messenger, an online publication.

Gundersen, a corporate attorney who lives in Orange County, California, told NCR that the "Big Lie" that Trump pushed about a stolen election created a false premise to overhauling election laws.

"The supposed need for passing these laws can't be actual election integrity, so it has to be something else," Gundersen said. "And I don't see what the nonracist reason could be."

Besides possibly not wanting to alienate politically conservative donors, other potential factors — including political calculations and disagreements among the bishops themselves — could explain their hesitancy or inability to collectively speak out against the new state-level restrictions on voting.

Related: Major Catholic funders and power brokers spearhead voter suppression efforts

"I think the USCCB, the church hierarchy in general, might say that we take stands on issues that directly reflect the teachings of the church, and that how elections are administered is not really central to Catholic teaching," said Geoffrey Layman, chairman of the political science department at the University of Notre Dame.

"I think they might say that, so in an effort to not stick their head into politics where it doesn't belong and to restrict their political activities that are central to church teaching. That might be one thing that they would say," said Layman, who also suggested that bishops in conservative states could be playing the political long game as well.

With the U.S. Supreme Court and its conservative majority more likely to give states further latitude to regulate abortion rights, possibly even overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, bishops in those states may not want to alienate Republican lawmakers when the

time comes to legislate away abortion, he said.

"And more generally, there is a lot of pretty pro-Republican sentiment within the American episcopate, within the hierarchy of bishops, and within the laity, especially in the South," Layman said.

However, that political rationale rings hollow to Catholics like Leticia Ochoa Adams, a Latina who lives in the Diocese of Austin, Texas.



Protesters take part in a July 31 march in Austin, Texas, for voting rights and against a measure in the Legislature to enact voting restrictions. (CNS/Reuters/Callaghan O'Hare)

"To me as a woman of color, the message that sends to me is that my church has to play politics for the sake of the unborn, which is not the way to defend the life of the unborn," said Adams, who last year created the website Catholic Speakers of Color to help Black and brown-skinned Catholics network.

Adams told NCR that bishops should not "throw everyone else under the bus" and feed into the power structures of the nation's two major political parties for the sake of the pro-life movement, which she said has been politicized to harmful effect.

"The way things are now, it tells me that I matter less than a rich white man who can support all kinds of things that go against church teaching," she said. "But he matters because he's got a bigger wallet than me?"

The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, on its website and its Twitter feed, has staked out positions on dozens of bills this year related to abortion, conscience rights for health care workers, "the advancement of gender ideology," as well as on issues related to immigration, religious liberty and education. But there is no recent mention of the Texas Legislature's pending bills to restrict voting access.

A spokesperson for the Texas Catholic Conference told NCR in an email that the conference would not be able to offer comment for this story.

In Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed his state's new restrictive voting law on May 6 during a live taping on the Fox News show "Fox and Friends." The law immediately drew legal challenges from groups such as the League of Women Voters of Florida and the Black Voters Matter Fund. NAACP President Derrick Johnson described the law as "a blatant and calculated attack on the right to vote."

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops did not take a stand on the law. Michael Sheedy, executive director of the conference, told NCR in an email that the voting bills the Florida legislature considered earlier this year were "rather complex."

"Not having sufficient expertise to know the true impact of the provisions, it would have been imprudent to take a position," Sheedy wrote. "At another level, we expected that if the bills were passed, the provisions would be challenged. In this case, the courts would be better suited to sort things out."

Baird of the National Black Sisters' Conference said many Black Catholics feel that the church has given lip service to issues that impact their communities, when in reality the institution often doesn't stand in solidarity with them.

"This is about the very survival of our democracy, and certainly what is happening is also very racist in that these bills are being put forward to keep African Americans, Latinos and other people of color from voting," said Baird.

"But it also impacts everyone as they close voting locations, as they make it harder for people to vote by mail, to have IDs, all that is going to have an impact on the elderly regardless of their color, so it's impacting us as a nation," she said. "And I don't know why the bishops are being so silent on this. But it's quite disappointing."

**Correction: This story originally misidentified Francis Mulcahy's name. We apologize for the error.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 3-16, 2021** print issue under the headline: As Southern states restrict voting rights, local bishops remain largely silent.