News



Rabbi David Saperstein, center right with microphone, speaks during a voting rights rally outside the White House on Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021, in Washington. (RNS photo by Jack Jenkins)

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An interfaith assortment of faith leaders and actors were arrested outside the White House on Tuesday (Oct. 19) as they demanded in prayers and speeches that President Joe Biden and lawmakers in Congress do more to advocate for voting rights legislation.

The Rev. Jamal Bryant, a prominent Georgia pastor who had asked God in his opening prayer to “dispatch every available angel to be assigned to every representative who is the disrupter of democracy," was led away along with Rabbi David Saperstein, a former U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, and Alyssa Milano, the former "Who's the Boss?" and "Melrose Place" actress who has dedicated herself to activism in recent years.

Immediately prior to their arrest, demonstrators at the hourlong protest were warned three times by police they were in violation of D.C. law by "obstructing or incommoding."

Criticism for inaction on the legislation, particularly the John Lewis Act and the For the People Act, was aimed equally at the president and at the Republican lawmakers who have opposed the two bills.

The Rev. Ferrell Malone of Waycross, Georgia — one of the plaintiffs in a case challenging a state elections law that activists decry as restrictive — noted his state “delivered for the White House” in the 2020 election by electing Biden and helping Democrats secure a majority in the U.S. Senate.

“It's time for President Biden, and Vice President Kamala Harris, and the Senate and the House of Representatives to pay up,” he said.

“I’ve known Joe Biden for 40 years,” Saperstein told the crowd before his arrest. “All his life he has fought for voting rights. … Which is why we expect him, above all, to stand up and to make this a priority even among other enormously important

priorities. This is the bedrock foundational right.”

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The Freedom to Vote Act, a compromise bill aimed at wooing those who disagree with key portions of the John Lewis Act, reportedly has support from all 50 Democratic U.S. senators but does not have enough Republican support to break the 60-vote supermajority required to override the Senate filibuster.

“In the face of injustice, we hear God's call to us,” Saperstein said.

The 1 p.m. protest, organized by the liberal advocacy group People for the American Way, was the second such protest outside the White House in recent weeks; the same groups convened a similar demonstration in early October.

Several speakers called on Biden to endorse ending the Senate filibuster, which has stymied many of his administration’s more progressive legislative efforts despite a Democratic majority in Congress. Since March, the president and other White House have officials alternately dismissed the idea of eliminating the rule and voiced openness to reforming its use.

At one point, protesters chanted: “Hey! Joe! The filibuster must go!”

But Saperstein was among those at Tuesday’s protest who did not support a complete elimination of the filibuster.

“The segment of the Jewish community that I represent — that is so committed to voting rights — we want to fix the filibuster here to prevent what we're seeing happening now without abandoning it,” Saperstein told Religion News Service in an interview.

Multiple protesters also called for granting statehood to Washington, D.C., a deeply Democratic area that would shift Congress leftward if given voting representationin the Senate and the House. The cause has grown in popularity among religious voting rights activists this year.

“In my faith tradition there is a Scripture that says: ‘Faith without works is dead,’” said the Rev. Delman Coates, pastor of Maryland’s Mount Ennon Baptist Church. “We're here today because there's been too much silence as it relates to voting

rights.”

As the the final group departed with a police escort, protesters raised their fists as supporters on the sidewalk sang the civil rights hymn “We Shall Overcome.”