



**National
Urban League**

To Be Equal #33

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Eric Holder and Bernette Johnson Honored at Whitney M. Young Awards Gala

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"In our efforts to protect voting rights and to prevent voting fraud, we will be vigilant and strong...we will not allow political pretext to disenfranchise American citizens of their most precious right." Attorney General Eric Holder

Two recipients of National Urban League awards at our recent annual conference in New Orleans are emblematic of our "Occupy the Vote" campaign to protect the voting rights of millions of Americans this November. Attorney General Eric Holder has likened the sudden proliferation of voter ID laws to modern day "poll taxes," and has made stopping voter suppression one of the Justice Department's top priorities. And Louisiana's first African American woman Supreme Court Justice, Bernette Joshua Johnson, who is the second longest serving judge on the Court and thus in line to be the next Chief Justice this February, is currently facing an unconstitutional effort to deny her that seat – a clear violation of the Voting Rights Act.

I was proud to present a Living Legend award to A.G. Holder and the President's Award to Justice Johnson at our Whitney M. Young awards gala on July 28th.

Since Eric Holder's 2009 appointment by President Obama as the first African American Attorney General in American history, he has reclaimed the nation's commitment to fairness, and expanded opportunity. Over the past three years, his Civil Rights Division has filed more criminal civil rights cases than ever before; and he has made significant strides in combatting discrimination in the nation's housing and lending markets. His commitment to voting rights is especially noteworthy.

In response to the outbreak of voter ID and restriction laws across the country, Attorney General Holder has initiated thorough reviews of proposed voting changes "in order to guard against disenfranchisement, and to help ensure that none of these proposals would have a discriminatory purpose or effect." Last December, his Justice Department rejected South Carolina's new voter ID law, finding that it discriminated against minority voters. And in June, the Federal District Court in Miami granted an injunction blocking Florida's new and "onerous"

restrictive voter registration law. The Justice Department also found that Florida's effort to purge its voter rolls of suspected non-citizens may violate Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

Justice Bernette Johnson was first elected to serve on the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1994 and is currently the second longest serving Associate Justice on the Court. Highly respected for her legal acumen and fairness, she has received numerous awards, including the 2009 Distinguished Jurist Award presented by the Louisiana Bar Association and the 2000 Medal of Honor which I was honored to present to her during my last term as Mayor of the City of New Orleans.

For much of her life, Justice Johnson has worked as an advocate for social justice and civil rights. Her election to the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1994 made her only the third African American jurist ever to serve on the state's highest court, after the Supreme Court ruled in 1991 that the state's method of electing Supreme Court Justices ensured that black voters would never be able to elect a black justice. The current move to deny her the Chief Justice seat is clearly in violation of the law.

Eric Holder and Bernette Johnson have earned their status as National Urban League honorees, and we will continue to stand with them in support of the values we share.

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