



North Carolina's "Moral Monday" Protests in Defense of Equal Voting Rights and Social Protections

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"We know we are in a war for the ballot. Raleigh is our Selma. The general assembly is our Edmund Pettus Bridge." That is how Reverend Doctor William Barber II explained a major purpose of Moral Monday protests against extreme laws enacted by North Carolina Republicans.

If there is a sacred tenet of American democracy, it would be one person, one vote, but this basic underpinning of a functioning and healthy democracy is being threatened by conservative takeovers of many state governments in the United States. The 2010 elections ushered in Republican super-majorities and an unfettered wave of right-wing activism, much of it focused on making voting more difficult for minority, low-income, and young voters. Perhaps no state felt this change as dramatically as North Carolina, where Republicans took control of the legislature and governor's office in 2010 and unleashed radical changes. The state has cut off unemployment insurance benefits to many workers and refuses to expand Medicaid with new federal funding. To keep themselves in power, Republicans have also enacted what some analysts have called the most extreme voter suppression law in the country. The new law cuts back early voting by a week, rules out early voting on Sundays when many African Americans go to the polls in groups, ends early registration for high school students, and requires voters to present by 2016 a specific type of government-issued photo identification that many do not have.

But extremism is not going unchallenged. A new movement is mounting weekly "Moral Mondays" protests against the voting restrictions and a range of other changes that participants see as deeply immoral. North Carolinians of all ages and social backgrounds are taking part in what one reporter calls a "spiritual revival of sorts... with thousands of pilgrims from all over the state coming... every Monday... [to] draw sustenance and energy from the growing people's uprising..."

The Moral Mondays Movement

Moral Mondays began in the summer of 2013 after the state legislature ended unemployment benefits for thousands of struggling North Carolina workers. Protestors marching to the capital in Raleigh were led by Barber, the president of the state branch of the National Association for Colored People. Using techniques similar to the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, Moral Mondays use peaceful civil disobedience to highlight the oppressive nature of the North Carolina government, offering what Barber calls a "deep, moral, constitutional critique of public policy."

As a Disciples of Christ pastor, Barber is a self-described evangelical who brings his skills as a preacher to the protests. Although the Moral Mondays protests are open to anyone whether religious or not, they resemble black church services with gospel songs, prayers, and speeches by local pastors furthering a shared sense of purpose and meaning. Since Moral Monday protests began last summer, over 900 arrests have been made. As one local reporter explained to readers, "if you're not from here, it may all seem a little counter-intuitive: a movement for inclusive and just secular governance that is deeply inflected with Christian ethics and arguments."

Religious Roots and Echoes of the Past

In fact, for much of American history the religious left has been on the side of creating a more just society – from the nineteenth-century abolitionist movements against slavery, to movements advocating rights for women and children, to the mid-20th century civil rights movement. By invoking religious, Biblical principles, the Moral Monday protests join a reinvigorated set of religious left efforts to influence U.S. politics over the last decade. From movements fighting to increase the minimum wage to new progressive religious organizations working for just immigration policies, a renewed religious left is once again wielding political power.

For North Carolina, religiously rooted battles for equal rights are nothing new. Home of the first sit-in movement at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensborough, North Carolina has long been the site of racial oppression and fights against it. Until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the right to vote in North Carolina was assured only to those wealthy and white; North Carolinians of color and the poor often had to fight just to exercise this basic right. At a press conference on August 13th about a lawsuit filed to challenge current voting law changes, Reverend Doctor Barber reminded everyone of this past and labeled new voter suppression laws "a vulgar misuse of political power designed to manipulate and rig elections." The North Carolina legislature, he said, is "on the wrong side of history... This anti-voting rights bill tramples on the blood of our martyrs, desecrates the graves of freedom fighters and in the 21st century lines up with the extreme racially driven philosophy of interposition and nullification, promoted by past political figures like George Wallace and Strom Thurmond."

Spreading Protests and Next Steps

Since Moral Mondays were launched in North Carolina, similar efforts have started in South Carolina, Georgia, and (on Tuesdays) in Alabama. Tim Franzen of the American Friends Service Committee points to a new "kind of Southern strategy that hasn't existed in many decades." Protests have brought out people ranging from factory workers and teachers to religious leaders, with everyone drawing strength from seeing themselves as part of something larger. Arrested at the protests, Karen Porter explained it simply as "the right thing to do." "We are all God's children," said another protestor. "How dare we deny the right to vote to a friend or to a neighbor?"

Moral Monday protests will continue and a lawsuit has been filed against voter restrictions laws. A North Carolina judge continued the case until 2015, but activists are hoping to get an injunction before then. Protesters currently have higher statewide public approval than the GOP-led General Assembly, which does not even get approval from a majority of Republican voters. This may mean that a new governor can eventually be elected. By reclaiming the language of morality, "Moral Mondays teaches," in the words of one protestor, "that you attack extremism. You don't attack Republicans or Democrats. You don't attack whites or blacks. And it's important to have a moral basis for fighting. You're dealing with right and wrong."

Research and quotes for this brief were drawn from Kristin Rawls, "The Liberal Protest that Would Shock the Right: Moral Monday," *Salon*, July 23, 2013; Martha Waggoner, "NC Moral Mondays Continue, Spread to Other States," *WNCN*, December 25, 2013; and other North Carolina news outlets.