Bush Signs Voting Rights Act Extension

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WASHINGTON — President Bush on Thursday signed legislation extending for 25 years the Voting Rights Act, the historic 1965 law which opened polls to millions of black Americans by outlawing racist voting practices in the South. "Congress has reaffirmed its belief that all men are created equal," he declared.

Bush signed the bill amid fanfare and before an South Lawn audience that included members of Congress, civil rights leaders and family members of civil rights leaders of the recent past. It was one of a series of high-profile ceremonies the president is holding to sign popular bills into law.

(enlarge photo)

President Bush departs after signing the Voting Rights Act of 2006 during a ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Thursday, July 27, 2006. From left are, Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., the president, Rep. James Sensbrenner, R-Wis., House Minoirty Leader Nancy Pelosi of Calif., Senate Majority Whip Mitch McConnell of Ky., and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nev. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

The Republican controlled Congress, eager to improve its standing with minorities ahead of the November elections, pushed the bill through even though key provisions were not set to expire until next year.

"The right of ordinary men and women to determine their own political future lies at the heart of the American experiment," Bush said. He said the Voting Rights Act proposed and signed by then-President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 "broke the segregationist lock on the voting box."

With the Republican Party's majority status in Congress in jeopardy and Bush's approval ratings low, the White House has turned to the South Lawn to provide a high-profile backdrop for signing popular bills into law.

Later in the day, Bush is to sign another bill sure to resonate with voters in this congressional election year: legislation establishing a national Internet database designed to let law enforcement and communities know where convicted sex offenders live and work.

By contrast, Bush chose to exercise the first veto of his 5 1/2 years as president in privacy last week, no audience, no cameras, no reporters. The bill he vetoed would have expanded federally funded research of embryonic stem cells, which is opposed by social conservatives but has wide support among the rest of the public.

White House officials said an open ceremony to veto a bill seemed inappropriate, although other presidents have done just that. Forty minutes after the Oval Office veto, Bush gave a major address on the issue in the East Room, open to the press and surrounded by families who have "adopted" leftover frozen embryos and used them to bear children.

In May, Bush took to the South Lawn to sign into law a bill that extended $70 billion in previously passed tax cuts. That package was also seen by Republicans as an opportunity to boost the popularity of the president and the Republican-controlled Congress

The South Lawn is hardly a common venue for presidential bill-signings, which usually occur in an office building next to the White House or, for particularly important legislation, in the East Room. The majestic backyard of the White House is typically reserved for pomp-filled welcoming ceremonies for foreign leaders or large social affairs like the annual Easter egg roll.

On Wednesday, workers scurried to get the expanse of lawn ready for the Voting Rights Act signing, setting up water stations and a large stage for Bush and the bill's primary supporters.

The list of some of the 600 expected guests reads like a who's-who of prominent black leaders and civil rights veterans: the Revs. Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson; friends and relatives of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks; Dorothy Height, the longtime chairwoman of the National Council of Negro Women; and

National Urban League head Marc Morial. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, despite its rocky history with Bush, was sending several representatives, including current president Bruce Gordon, chairman Julian Bond and former head Benjamin Hooks.

The White House also anticipated heavy participation from Capitol Hill, where a long line of lawmakers were looking for a chance to share the spotlight.

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