

Cozen O'Connor Team Partners with NAACP to Win Historic Voting Rights Victory

Wednesday, August 30, 2017

Cozen O'Connor, alongside co-counsel NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) and New Orleans-based civil rights lawyer Ron Wilson, obtained an important trial victory for our clients—the Terrebonne Parish NAACP and four individual Black voters—in a voting rights case in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Louisiana.

In a detailed and compelling 91-page decision announced on August 17, the court held that Louisiana's use of at-large voting for electing five members to the 32nd Judicial District Court (the Judicial District that covers Terrebonne Parish) violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the U.S. Constitution. The decision followed a bench trial, which was held in March and April in Baton Rouge, during which twenty-seven witnesses testified, including the plaintiffs, the currently-sitting judges of the 32nd Judicial District Court, historians, expert demographers, experts in redistricting, and local politicians (all of whom testified that they opposed creating a sub district for a minority judgeship).

In the decision, Judge James Brady held that the current voting structure in Terrebonne dilutes black citizens' votes in violation of the Constitution and Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, finding "a strong case of vote dilution." The court noted that, in 1996, a task force created by the Louisiana Supreme Court had found that district-based voting was "the only feasible means of ensuring diversity" in the state court system.

Judge Brady further found that the maintenance of the at-large voting system in Terrebonne Parish had a discriminatory purpose. To reach this conclusion, Judge Brady catalogued two decades of unsuccessful attempts by black leadership in the community to change the voting system, noting that proposals for district-based voting had been rejected by officials on at least six occasions between 1997 and 2011 based on "justifications that do not seem completely legitimate."

The Cozen O'Connor trial team included Commercial Litigation department member Michael de Leeuw; Alexander Selarnick, an associate in Cozen O'Connor's Global Insurance department; William Lesser, an associate in the firm's Commercial Litigation department and paralegals William Choy and Elma Saxon.

Read the opinion [here](#).

Read press about the trial [here](#) and [here](#).

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