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Barack Obama

Senate Floor Speech on Voting Rights Act Reauthorization

delivered 20 July 2006



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Mr. President, I rise today both humbled and honored by the opportunity to express my support for renewal of the expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

I want to thank the many people inside and outside Congress who have worked so hard over the past year to get us here. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the leadership on both sides of the aisle. And we owe special thanks to Chairmen Sensenbrenner and Specter, Ranking Members Conyers and Leahy, and Representative Mel Watt. Without their work and dedication, and the support of voting rights advocates across the country, I doubt that this bill would have come before us so soon.

I want to thank both Chambers and both sides of the aisle, as well, for getting this done with the same broad support that drove the original act 40 years ago. At a time when Americans are frustrated with the partisan bickering that too often stalls our work, the refreshing display of bipartisanship we're seeing today reflects our collective belief in the success of the act and reminds us of how effective we can be when we work together.



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Nobody can deny that we've come a long way since 1965. Look at the registration numbers. Only two years after the passage of the original Act, registration numbers for minority voters in some States doubled. Soon after, not a single State covered by the Voting Rights Act had registered less than half of its minority voting age population.

Look at the influence of African-American elected officials at every single level of government. There are African-American Members of Congress. Since 2001, our Nation's top diplomat¹ has been African American. In fact, most of America's elected African-American officials come from States covered by section 5 of the Voting Rights Act -- States like Mississippi, and Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia.

But to me, the most striking evidence of our progress can be found right across this building in my dear friend Congressman John Lewis, who was on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement, risking life and limb for freedom. And on March 7th, 1965, he led 600 peaceful protesters, demanding the right to vote, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Now, I've often thought about the people on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day, not only John Lewis and Hosea Williams, who led the march, but the hundreds of everyday Americans who left their homes and their churches to join it -- Blacks and Whites, teenagers, children, teachers, bankers, shopkeepers -- what Dr. King called a beloved community of God's children ready to stand for freedom.

And I wonder sometimes -- Where did they find that kind of courage? You know, when you're facing row after row of State troopers on horseback, armed with billy clubs and tear gas -- when they're coming toward you spewing hatred and violence, how do you simply stop, kneel down, and pray to the Lord for salvation?

But the most amazing thing of all is that after that day, after John Lewis was beaten within an inch of his life, after people's heads were gashed open and their eyes were burned, and they watched their children's innocence literally beaten out of them -- after all that, they went back and marched again. They marched again. They crossed the bridge. They awakened a nation's conscience. And not five months later the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law. It was reauthorized in 1970, in 1975, and 1982.

Now, in 2006 John Lewis, the physical scars of those marches still visible, is an original cosponsor of the fourth reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act. And he was joined last week by 389 of his House colleagues in voting for its passage.

There were some in the House, and there may be some in the Senate, who argue that the Act is no longer needed, that the protections of section 5's "preclearance" requirement -- a requirement that ensures certain States are upholding the right to vote -- are targeting the wrong States. Unfortunately, the evidence refutes that notion. Of the 1100 objections issued by the Department of Justice since 1965, 56 [percent] occurred since the last reauthorization in 1982. Over half have occurred since 1982. So despite the progress these States have made in upholding the right to vote, it's clear that problems still exist.



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Now, there are others who would argue that we shouldn't renew section 203's protection of language minorities. These arguments have been tied to debates over immigration and they tend to muddle a noncontroversial issue -- protecting the right to vote -- with one of today's most contentious debates. But let's remember, you can't request language assistance if you're not a voter. And you can't be a voter if you are not a citizen. And while voters, as citizens, must be proficient in English, many are simply more confident that they can cast ballots printed in their native languages without making errors. It's not an unreasonable assumption.

A representative of the Southwestern Voter Registration Project is quoted as saying, (quote):

Citizens who prefer Spanish registration cards do so because they feel more connected to the process. They also feel they trust the process more when they [fully] understand it.²

These sentiments, connection to and trust in our democratic process, are exactly what we want from our voting rights legislation.

Our challenges, of course, don't end at reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act. We have to prevent the problems we've seen in recent elections from happening again. We've seen political operatives purge voters from registration rolls for no legitimate reason, prevent eligible ex-felons from casting ballots, distribute polling equipment unevenly, and deceive voters about the time, location, and rules of elections. And unfortunately, these efforts have been directed primarily at minority voters -- the disabled, low-income individuals, and other historically disenfranchised groups.

The Help America Vote Act, or HAVA, was a big step in the right direction. But we've got to do more. We need to fully fund HAVA if we're going to move forward in the next stage of securing the right to vote for every citizen. We need to enforce critical requirements like statewide registration databases. We need to make sure polling equipment is distributed equitably and equipment actually works. And we need to work on getting more people to the polls on election day.

We need to make sure that minority voters are not the subject of some deplorable intimidation tactics when they do go to the polls.

You know, in 2004 Native American voters in South Dakota were confronted by men posing as law enforcement. These hired intimidators joked about jail time for ballot missteps and followed voters to their cars to record their license plates.

["]In Lake County, Ohio, some voters received a memo on bogus Board of Election[s] letterhead, informing voters who registered through Democratic and NAACP drives that they could not vote.["]³



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In Wisconsin, a flier purporting to be from the "Milwaukee Black Voters League" was circulated in predominantly African-American neighborhoods with the following message: "If you've already voted in any election this year, you can't vote in the presidential election. "If you violate any of these laws, you can get ten years in prison and your children will get taken away from you."⁴

Now, think about that. We've got a lot more work to do. This occasion is a cause for celebration. But it's also an opportunity to renew our commitment to voting rights. As Congressman Lewis said last week: It's clear that we've come a great distance, but we still have a great distance to go.^{5,6} Now, the memory of Selma still lives on in the spirit of the Voting Rights Act. Since that day, the Voting Rights Act has been a critical tool in ensuring that all Americans not only have the right to vote but have the right to have their vote counted.

And those of us concerned about protecting those rights can't afford to sit on our laurels upon reauthorization of this bill. We need to take advantage of this rare, united front and continue to fight to ensure unimpeded access to the polls of all Americans. In other words, we need to take the spirit that existed on that bridge, and we have to spread it across this country.

You know, two weeks after the first march was turned back, Dr. King spoke, and he told a gathering of organizers and activists and community members -- he said that they should not despair because "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. That's because of the work that each of us do that it bends toward justice. It's because of people like John Lewis and Fannie Lou Hamer and Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks -- all the giants upon whose shoulders we stand -- that we are beneficiaries of that arc bending toward justice.

That's why I stand here today. I would not be in the United States Senate had it not been for the efforts and courage of so many parents and grandparents and ordinary people who were willing to reach up and bend that arc in the direction of justice.

I hope we continue to see that spirit live on not just during this debate but throughout all our work here in the Senate.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.

¹ Colin Powell (2001-2005) and Condoleezza Rice (2005-2009) served as U.S. Secretaries of State, the Nation's top diplomatic post.

² Quotation Source: Landa, V. (18 October 2005). Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives [via Google Books]



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³ Quotation (near verbatim) Source: Becker, J. & Finkel, D. (31 October 2004). Now they're registered, Now they're not. Washington Post. p. A22.

⁴ Quotation Source: Becker, J. & Finkel, D. (31 October 2004). Now they're registered, Now they're not. Washington Post. p. A22.

⁵ Possible Quotation Source: On 4 May 2006, Representative Mel Watt (D-North Carolina) read a prepared statement on behalf of Rep. John Lewis (D-Georgia) who was tending to a prior committee assignment. That statement in full reads: "The Voting Rights Act was necessary in 1965, and unfortunately it is still necessary today, as the extensive Committee record makes clear. **We have come a great distance, but we still have a great distance to go** before all Americans have free and equal access to the ballot box. This legislation is among the most important that this Congress will consider, and I trust that we will take our responsibility to protect the voting rights of all Americans very seriously as we pass this legislation. We must renew the expiring sections of the Voting Rights Act in this session of Congress. Thank you." (emphasis added)

⁶ Possible Quotation Source: On 13 July 2006 (a week before Senator Obama's address above) Representative John Lewis passionately delivered a speech from the Floor of the House of Representatives. Video recording of that statement is available here at C-SPAN (beg. at 3:17:11). A transcript is available on Mr. Lewis' government website here.