

(Washington DC) Today, the Senate and House leadership introduced the “Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006,” which would reauthorize the Voting Rights Act (VRA). This update of the VRA would extend key provisions for 25 years that were set to expire in summer of 2007.

“This bill honors the three civil rights pioneers whose names grace it but also the countless others who fought valiantly to secure and safeguard the right to vote,” said Congressman Charlie Gonzalez, Chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Civil Rights Task Force. “The VRA reaffirms the essential right to vote as the bedrock right all others rely upon. Without the power to hold elected officials accountable at the ballot box, our democracy will fail to work. No one should have to endure discrimination or intimidation at the ballot box, and law enforcement officials will continue to have the tools to clear away any impediments or obstacles in exercising this fundamental right.

I am pleased that the Section 5 preclearance was strengthened so that the proper level of scrutiny will be used when reviewing redistricting plans from areas with discriminatory voting histories. It is important that we ensure that voting maps with the intent to discriminate are not implemented.

Moreover, in keeping with the spirit of the original VRA, I am especially pleased that Section 203 was reauthorized for another 25 years. No American citizen should have their right to vote abridged or denied because of a language barrier. Making sure that all voters can read and understand a ballot is paramount if we want all Americans to participate. Section 203 is still necessary so that language barriers do not function like a modern literacy test which disenfranchises those with limited English proficiency.

Finally, I am grateful that work on this bill was done in a bipartisan manner that was aimed at getting results rather than headlines. I would like to thank Judiciary Chairman James Sensenbrenner, Ranking Member John Conyers, and Congressional Black Caucus Chair Melvin Watts for their patience and persistence in crafting this legislation.”

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Speaker Dennis Hastert, and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi held a joint press conference to announce the introduction of the bill on the East front of the U.S. Capitol. Also in attendance were Senators Arlen Specter,

Patrick Leahy, Edward Kennedy and Representatives John Lewis, James Sensenbrenner, John Conyers, and Melvin Watt.

The VRA of 2006 extends the following provisions for 25 years: the Section 5 preclearance mandate, Section 203 minority language assistance, and authorization for the Attorney General to send election observers to monitor voting procedures. The bicameral, bipartisan VRA introduced today would bolster Section 5 after two Supreme Court rulings (*Reno v. Bossier*, *Parrish I and II* and *Georgia v. Ashcroft*) narrowed the protections afforded to minority voters in areas where they have traditionally been subject to discriminatory practices and intimidation. Section 203 requires that any jurisdictions with significant numbers of limited-English-proficiency voters make available bilingual oral and written assistance.

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