



July 19, 2006

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the more than 900,000 members and activists of People For the American Way, we urge you to pass without amendments the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006, introduced as H.R. 9 by Representatives James Sensenbrenner, John Conyers, and Mel Watt. The House passed H.R. 9 on July 13; it was then placed on the Senate calendar on July 17 and now awaits consideration. Reauthorizing the VRA should be of paramount importance to anyone concerned about protecting the right to vote.

Forty years ago, thousands of Americans risked their lives to challenge systems that prevented millions of Americans from exercising their right to vote. After continued protests by civil rights activists and everyday citizens over the gross disenfranchisement of African Americans – culminating in a violent confrontation in 1965 during an Alabama protest for voting rights – President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act (VRA) into law. Today, it continues to ensure that all racial minorities in America have equal access to the ballot box. Since being enacted, the temporary provisions (Sections 5, 203, and 6-9) of the VRA have been renewed and extended on several occasions – and must be renewed and restored again before August of 2007.

The electoral situation in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina highlights how important Section 5 is and why it is still needed to guard against potential disenfranchisement. This section requires jurisdictions with a history of discrimination to have their voting laws and regulations pre-approved (or “pre-cleared”) by the federal government or a federal court before they may be changed. Furthermore, it is widely known that the deterrent effect of Section 5 has continued to prove significant in protecting minorities against potentially discriminatory electoral changes. Sections 6-9 also help protect the right to vote by authorizing the federal government to send federal election examiners and observers to Section 5 jurisdictions when there is evidence of attempts to intimidate minority voters at the polls.

Lastly, Section 203 remains critical to ensuring the right to vote for minority voters by requiring certain jurisdictions to provide bilingual language assistance to voters in communities where there is a concentration of citizens who are limited English proficient and illiterate. It currently covers four language groups: American Indians, Asian Americans, Alaskan Natives, and those of Spanish heritage. A democratic nation of immigrants must recognize the need to help these citizens make their voices heard.

Together, Sections 5, 203 and 6-9 have all been reauthorized with broad bi-partisan support in the past, and continue to be of paramount importance to citizens’ equal and full civic

participation. In continuing the fight for equal access to the ballot box, we urge you to join your House colleagues in passing H.R. 9 without amendments.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Ralph G. Neas in black ink.

Ralph G. Neas
President

Handwritten signature of Tanya Clay House in blue ink.

Tanya Clay House
Director, Public Policy