

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
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For Immediate Release
Contact: Zach Lowe - (202) 224-8567

Remarks of U.S. Senator Russ Feingold
On the Renewal of the Voting Rights Act

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to be here today for this first hearing on the renewal of the Voting Rights Act.

First, I'd like to welcome Chairman Sensenbrenner and Ranking Member Conyers and thank them for being here. Chairman Sensenbrenner, your leadership on this issue has been heartening. You came to this issue in 1982 admittedly as a skeptic. Yet you approached the issue with an open mind, and ultimately came away with the impression that, as you have said, "the ingenuity of the human mind is limitless when it comes to devising ways to rig elections or to favor certain candidates." In light of the evidence presented during that reauthorization process, you worked tirelessly to ensure the Act's reauthorization. We were fortunate to have you as a champion of the Act at that time, and we are fortunate to have you here again today as Chairman.

I also welcome my colleague and friend, Representative Conyers. Few in this Congress have done more to advance civil rights than Mr. Conyers. He and I have worked closely on many legislative issues, including racial profiling, bankruptcy, and the integrity of our electoral process. I'm very glad you could be with us here today.

The Voting Rights Act has been hailed as the most important piece of federal legislation in our nation's history. Not just the most important piece of civil rights legislation, but the most important piece of legislation ever passed. This may well be true: it is from our political rights, our rights of citizenship, that all other freedoms flow. Without a meaningful chance to vote, there can be no equality before the law, no equal access to justice, no equal opportunity in the workplace or to share in the benefits and burdens of citizenship.

In 1965, the year that the Voting Rights Act first passed, our nation was failing to fulfill one of its most fundamental promises: representation for all. At that time, African Americans were excluded from almost all public offices in many areas of the South, and discriminatory election practices at the state level were having a devastating effect on the ability of minorities to exercise their right to vote. In response to the horrific events in Selma, Alabama and after years of effort in Congress and around the country, on August 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act became law.

Certainly, much has changed since then. The Voting Rights Act has allowed millions of minority voters to exercise their constitutional rights to participate fully in elections. There are a record number of African American and Hispanic members serving in Congress today, and the number of minorities serving in other levels of government has increased dramatically as well. Furthermore, the Act has been amended to cover non-English speaking minorities such as Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, and other minority groups, and has been used to examine and challenge new election formats that dilute minority votes.

Unfortunately, we have much more work to do. As the record that our witnesses present helps to illuminate, in each election cycle, many Americans are still disenfranchised by discriminatory redistricting plans, voter intimidation

tactics, long lines at polling places, inadequate numbers of voting machines, and lifetime restrictions on voting rights for ex-felons. In 2007, key elements of the Voting Rights Act, including the federal pre-clearance requirement, provisions related to federal examiners and observers, and certain language assistance provisions, are due to expire.

Voters should not be put in the position of having to refight the battles won in the civil rights struggle. We should be building on the success of the Voting Rights Act, not turning back the clock in the face of ongoing threats to our election system. I hope today's hearing will be the first step in that process in the Senate, and I look forward to working with supporters of the Voting Rights Act on both sides of the aisle to reauthorize the Act this year and make sure we establish the legislative record needed to support it in court.

I want to thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing, and thank our witnesses from across the Capitol for their work on this issue and for joining us today.