

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee
On “From Selma to *Shelby County*: Working Together to Restore
the Protections of the Voting Rights Act”
July 17, 2013**

I welcome everyone to this important hearing on an issue that affects all Americans – our right to vote. The title of today’s hearing references the historic effort to protect our voting rights and expresses our determination to continue to work together to affirm the Voting Rights Act. From its inception and through several reauthorizations, the Voting Rights Act has always been a bipartisan effort and I hope that will continue. In keeping with that tradition today we welcome Congressman John Lewis and Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner. These men come from different parties and different states, but they share a deep commitment to the issue of voting rights. I look forward to working with both of them as we look toward legislation to restore the protections of the VRA in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision last month in *Shelby County v. Holder*.

The historic struggle for individual voting rights reached a turning point on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. There, a group of peaceful marchers led by a young John Lewis were brutally attacked by state troopers. The events of that day, now known as “Bloody Sunday,” were captured in graphic photographs and on television. The powerful images became a catalyst for the passage of the Voting Rights Act. John Lewis later said that “your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful, nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union.” To me, and to millions of others, John Lewis is a hero and I thank him for being with us today. His sacrifice and the sacrifice of so many others who devoted their lives to the issue of voting equality must never be forgotten.

In 2006, Republicans and Democrats in the Senate and in the House of Representatives joined together to pass a reauthorization of the landmark Voting Rights Act with overwhelming bipartisan support. Congressman Sensenbrenner, as Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, was a true leader of that effort. Without his commitment and leadership, we would not have been able to reauthorize the Act in 2006. I was proud to work with Congressman Sensenbrenner in 2006 and I thank him for coming here to testify today.

In *Shelby County v. Holder*, five justices of the Supreme Court held that the coverage formula of the Voting Rights Act was outdated, yet even the five justices who struck down the coverage formula in Section 4 of the VRA have acknowledged that discrimination in voting continues to be a problem. And as Chief Justice Roberts noted in the majority opinion, “voting discrimination still exists; no one doubts that.” That is why we are here today. The Supreme Court has called on Congress to come together to update the Voting Rights Act to meet current conditions, and it is up to us to meet that challenge. We must work together as a body – not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans – to ensure that we protect against racial discrimination in voting. We can only do that with a strong Voting Rights Act.

In his historic “I have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

We owe it to our children and grandchildren to restore the Voting Rights Act to fulfill this promise and uphold the Constitution. No one's right to vote should be suppressed or denied in the United States of America, yet we continue to witness such discriminatory practices today. I hope we can work together to address this most fundamental problem that tears at the fabric of this democracy. I thank all of the witnesses who are here with us today.

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