

August 08, 2005

Voting Rights Act still needed

Letter to the Editor, Chicago Defender

Dear Editor:

This Saturday marks an important anniversary.

Forty years ago, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, a law widely considered to be the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted.

The act enforces the 15th Amendment's permanent guarantee: No person shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or color.

The act also contains several special provisions that impose even more stringent requirements in certain jurisdictions throughout the country. And while it is a permanent law, Congress must periodically renew parts of the act that authorize federal oversight in jurisdictions with a history of discriminatory voting practices.

The act is due for renewal in 2007.

Fearing the protections of the act could be in jeopardy, the Rev. Jesse Jackson will hold a march this weekend in Atlanta . Jackson wants Congress to reauthorize the act and maintain strict scrutiny on the states with a long history of race-based discrimination.

As chief election official in Cook County , I agree with Jackson . Congress should not tamper with such an important, sensitive piece of legislation.

In an ideal nation, racial and ethnic discrimination would not exist at a polling place. Unfortunately, discrimination still exists in today's political landscape.

The act safeguards the right to vote. The city of Kilmichael , Miss. , population 830, offers a perfect example of why it is needed.

In 2001, Kilmichael's all-white board of aldermen cancelled the town election when it became apparent that the first black mayor and aldermen might be elected. The aldermen wanted to convert the town's election systems into districts so that some of the white aldermen could keep their seats. The justice department stepped in and blocked the move.

While there are serious reports of discrimination in some jurisdictions across the country, there is no doubt that we have made great strides over the past 40 years. The act has provided millions of minority voters the opportunity to cast their ballots and have their voices heard.

By extending the expiring provisions, Congress will ensure that minorities continue to receive equal treatment in American politics and that those voices are not silenced.

Sincerely,

David Orr, Cook County Clerk