



Statement for the Hearing Record

Before the

Senate Committee on the Judiciary

“The Voting Rights Amendment Act, S.1945: Updating the Voting Rights Act in Response to Shelby County v. Holder”

June 25, 2014

Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Urban League and our 95 Urban League affiliates in 36 states and the District of Columbia, we thank you for holding this most important hearing and offer our strong support for the *Voting Rights Amendment Act of 2014 (S.1945)*.

One year ago today, the U.S. Supreme Court dealt a crushing blow to voting rights by removing important protections for voters who had suffered—and still suffer—historic disenfranchisement in its devastating 5-4 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. As a result, we are left with a Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) that is insufficient to protect our fundamental right to vote, particularly in those states and localities where racial discrimination in voting remains real, documented and ongoing.

A newly released report¹ by the Brennan Center for Justice demonstrates that there is no time to waste to move and enact the VRAA before this November's mid-term elections. The report finds that since the 2010 election, new voting restrictions are slated to be in place in 22 states²; unless these restrictions are blocked — and there are court challenges to laws in six of those states — voters in nearly half the country could find it harder to cast a ballot in the 2014 midterm election than they did in 2010. The new laws range from photo ID requirements to early voting cutbacks to voter registration restrictions. The report points out that race was a significant factor, where of the 11 states with the highest African-American turnout in 2008, 7 have new restrictions in place; and of the 12 states with the largest Hispanic population growth between 2000 and 2010, 9 passed laws making it harder to vote.³

¹ “The State of Voting in 2014,” by Wendy R. Weiser, By Erik Opsal, Brennan Center For Justice at New York University School of Law, June 17, 2014, <http://www.brennancenter.org/print/11892>

² Ibid. See note [1].

³ Ibid. p. 3.

The National Urban League believes that the provisions in the bicameral, bipartisan *Voting Rights Amendment Act* include many key elements of a nationwide, modern, flexible and forward-looking VRA and offer a commonsense approach in response to the *Shelby* decision. The legislation would provide new tools to get ahead of voting discrimination *before it occurs* and ensure that any proposed election changes are transparent. Through this Senate hearing, we look forward to a robust discussion of the problems voters across the country still face in the wake of the *Shelby* decision. In light of the raw reality that discrimination in voting is not a thing of the past, there is the “urgency of now” that calls upon Congress to act before we risk keeping more and more voters from the polls and inflicting additional damage to our democracy.

As a historic civil rights, direct service and urban advocacy organization dedicated to economic empowerment in historically underserved urban communities, the National Urban League is acutely aware of the importance and power of the voting franchise. In 2012, we launched our Occupy the Vote effort which directly reached more than 300,000 citizens across the country. Through a robust grassroots campaign, including door-to-door canvassing, online outreach, and targeted telephone calls, the National Urban League registered, educated, and turned our communities out to the polls. The Occupy the Vote campaign emphasized the importance of year round engagement and that every election matters.

Additionally, through the Urban League's work across the country to help secure equity and excellence in education, jobs with livable wages, employment training for high school dropouts and the unskilled, affordable housing and homeownership, affordable health care and the elimination of health disparities, we can attest first-hand to the powerful relationship that exists between access to the ballot box and access to economic and social justice.

The National Urban League believes that there is no better and fitting tribute to the men and women who, 50 years ago, fought for and died to secure a Civil Rights Act and a Voting Rights Act than to pass the VRAA this year before the November mid-term elections. We cannot focus only on a celebration of progress. We must also ensure there is a continuation of the very equality and opportunity that are at the core of this country's democratic values.

About the National Urban League

The National Urban League (www.nul.org) is a historic civil rights and urban advocacy organization dedicated to economic empowerment in historically underserved urban communities. Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League has improved the lives of tens of millions of people nationwide through direct service programs that are implemented locally by its 95 Urban League affiliates in 36 states and the District of Columbia. The organization also conducts public policy research and advocacy activities from its D.C.-based, Washington Bureau. The National Urban League, a BBB-accredited organization, has a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, placing it in the top 10 percent of all U.S. charities for adhering to good governance, fiscal responsibility and other best practices.