African Americans and the Expiration of the Voting Rights Act

One of the many urban legends making the rounds—at the speed of a mouse click, thanks to the Internet—states that the rights of African Americans to vote will expire in 2007. This story has been circulating for several years and, rightfully so, has upset and angered millions of African Americans who thought that their voting rights would be affected.

First of all, what was the Voting Rights Act designed to do?

African Americans were granted the legal right to vote with the passage of the 15th Amendment, which became law in 1870 after the Civil War and barred racial discrimination in the polling booth. However, some racist state and local officials continued to wield their power by systematically depriving black voters of their rights through the institution of literacy tests or other so-called "qualifying conditions."

The purpose of the Voting Rights Act was to grant the federal government control of the voter registration process in any state or voting district that, in 1964, had set up any such stipulation and in which fewer than half of the voting-age residents had either registered or voted. Six Southern states and several counties in several other states were then covered by the VRA. If any of these jurisdictions wanted to amend any aspect of its voting rules and regulations, it was required to bring the proposed change before federal officials for review. This was meant to prohibit the institution from doing anything with discriminatory intent or effect. Additional provisions in the VRA included a ban on the future use of literacy tests to determine voter eligibility and a pledge of legal action by the attorney general if the use of poll taxes in state elections was continued.

The Voting Rights Act was enacted for an initial five-year phase. It was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on August 6, 1965. Since then, it has been both extended and expanded, and new requirements have been introduced. One of these new requirements stipulates that polling places must provide bilingual election materials. President Ronald Reagan signed a 25-year extension in 1982.

But in July of 2006, a number of anti-VRA Republican lawmakers began making their voices heard. Georgia Congressman Lynn Westmoreland led a group of representatives hailing from some pre-clearance states who claimed that it was unfair to target their states, citing the changes that have taken place since 1965. In addition, Representative Steve King of Iowa argued for the abolishment of translators or multilingual ballots for U.S. citizens who do not speak English. On July 27, 2006, President George W. Bush signed into law the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006.

So what caused all the ruckus? Read on. The following text was taken from a popular urban-legend email.

PLEASE PASS THIS ON TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS YOU CAN!!!!

We are quickly approaching the 21st Century and I was wondering if anyone out there knew what the significance of the year 2007 is to Black America? Did you know that our right to vote will expire in the year 2007? Seriously! The Voters Rights Act signed in 1965 by Lyndon B. Johnson was just an ACT.

It was not made a law. In 1982 Ronald Reagan amended the Voters Rights Act for only another 25 years. Which means that in the year 2007 we could lose the right to vote!

Does anyone realize that Blacks/African Americans are the only group of people who still require PERMISSION under the United States Constitution to vote?!

In the year 2007 Congress will once again convene to decide whether or not Blacks should retain the right to vote (crazy, but true). In order for this to be passed, 38 states will have to approve an extension.

In my opinion and many others, this is ludicrous! Not only should the extension be approved, but ... this Act must be made a law. Our right to vote should no longer be up for discussion, review and/or evaluation.

We must contact our Congress persons, Senators, Alderpersons, etc., to put a stop to this! As bona fide citizens of the United States, we cannot "drop the ball" on this one!
We have come too far to let government make us take such a huge step backward. So please, let us push forward to continue to build the momentum towards gaining equality. Please pass this onto others, as I am sure that many more individuals are not aware of this.

The apparent confusion is based on the assumption that the Voting Rights Act alone is what confers upon African Americans the right to vote. But in fact, the VRA was put in place to help to enforce the rights granted by the 15th Amendment at state and local levels where discriminatory practices were employed. The fundamental ruling against discrimination towards any American in the voting booth was inscribed in the 15th Amendment and does not expire in 2007—or ever.