

Georgia has changed for the better, and the Voting Rights Act should too

By Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R-Ga.)

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 worked. It changed Georgia dramatically for the better.

Now, as Congress considers a 25-year extension of the law, we need to modernize the Voting Rights Act to reflect the reality of today — a reality strongly shaped by the successes of the original legislation.

In 1965, the Voting Rights Act overturned the institutionalized discrimination embedded in the laws of Georgia and other Southern states. The law unshackled a significant portion of our state's residents and launched them into the political process by guaranteeing their right to vote. As a result, Georgia today represents a model of voter equality for states with diverse populations.

In fact, an academic study documents that black Georgians vote at higher rates than white Georgians. There are nine black statewide elected officials — most of whom defeated white opponents — including our state attorney general, the labor commissioner and three state Supreme Court justices, one of whom is chief justice. Black representation in statewide offices almost exactly parallels their proportion in the state's population. Four of our state's 13 members of the U.S. House are African-Americans — two of whom represent majority-white districts. It would be difficult to find a state with a more diverse group of elected officials.

Georgia is home to some of the most prosperous majority black communities in the United States. Today, our nation's best and brightest African-Americans flock to Georgia not for Freedom Rides but for great opportunities and a high quality of life.

Yet, despite Georgia's revolutionary strides in voter equality, the Voting Rights Act still treats Georgia as if it's a backward society governed by the laws of Jim Crow.

Let me explain. The original Voting Rights Act created a formula to determine which states were denying minority citizens their right to vote. Congress applied the formula to the 1964 election turnout numbers, and Georgia was one of several states that essentially failed the test. The law allowed the federal government to approve or disapprove all election-law changes, from redistricting to moving voting precincts, in those states.

Since then, Congress has renewed the Voting Rights Act several times without looking at changes in the states affected by the law.

Renewing the law as it is would keep Georgia in the penalty box for

25 more years. It doesn't make sense to subjugate Georgia to the whims of federal bureaucrats until 2031 based on the turnout of an election featuring Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson.

If Georgia's sins can never be forgiven, shouldn't there be an Accused Witch Protection Act that applies only to Massachusetts? Shouldn't our foreign policy treat South Africa as if it's still governed by a racist apartheid regime?

It's not simply a matter of fairness and common sense. There's a legal issue too. The Supreme Court ruled in 1966 that singling out states in the Voting Rights Act was constitutional only because it was narrowly tailored to address a specific problem and "temporary." We're already well past "temporary."

I do think there's a solution that will bring consensus. I'm proposing that Congress modernize the Voting Rights Act by applying the formula to the 2004 election. That way federal oversight would no longer apply to states that have corrected past problems. It would also allow the federal government to expand oversight to states where new problems have developed.

The Voting Rights Act has served our nation well. We dishonor the accomplishments of the law if we pretend nothing's changed since 1965.

Westmoreland represents Georgia's 8th Congressional District.