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Office of the White House Press Secretary

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THE WHITE HOUSE

FACT SHEET

AMENDMENTS TO THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 (H.R. 6219)

President Ford today signed H.R. 6219, amending the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This extends the temporary provisions of the Act for an additional seven years and expands coverage of the Act to language-minority citizens.

BACKGROUND

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted to banish the blight of racial discrimination in voting. It became effective on August 6, 1965, and gave the U. S. Attorney General the power to appoint Federal examiners to supervise voter registration in States or voting districts where a literacy or other qualifying test was in use and where fewer than 50 per cent of voting-age residents were registered or had voted in 1964. Other provisions of the Act set stiff penalties for interference with voter rights and prohibited States from enacting new laws affecting the right to vote unless a Federal court in the District of Columbia or the Attorney General gave prior approval.

Several of the provisions of the 1965 Act were enacted on a temporary basis, for a five-year period. These temporary provisions were extended in 1970 for an additional five years. Further, a nationwide ban on the use of literacy or other qualifying tests as a prerequisite to voting was enacted for a five-year period.

The Act has often been referred to as perhaps the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever enacted by the Congress. Since its enactment, substantial progress has been made in assuring all citizens the right to vote.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS LEGISLATION

Title I of H.R. 6219 extends the special provisions of the 1965 Act, including the requirement of preclearance of voting changes and the authority to use Federal examiners and observers in covered jurisdictions, for an additional seven years. It also makes permanent the nationwide ban on literacy tests or other devices.

Title II of the bill expands the special provisions of the Act to jurisdictions in which, on November 1, 1972, more than five per cent of the citizens of voting age were members of a "language minority" (persons who are American Indians, Asian-Americans, Alaskan natives or of Spanish heritage) and in which fewer than fifty per cent of the citizens of voting age were registered to vote or actually voted in the 1972 Presidential election. Such jurisdictions would be subject to the preclearance and examiner and observer provisions of the Act for a period of ten years.

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Title III of the Act bans for ten years English-only elections in States and political subdivisions in which more than five per cent of the voting age citizens are members of any single "language minority" and in which the illiteracy rate of the language minority is greater than the national illiteracy rate. Jurisdictions covered by this ban will be required to print certain registration and election materials in both English and the language of the language minority.

Title IV permits private citizens, in addition to the Attorney General, to commence suits to protect the voting rights of persons in jurisdictions other than those in which the special provisions of the Act are already in force.

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