



## Elected Officials of Color Display Strong Support for the Voting Rights Act

Elected officials of color – both male and female – showed strong support for the renewal of the 2007 Extension of the Voting Rights Act. While we hypothesized we might find differences across racial and ethnic lines, in fact, we found considerable overall support for the Act. When asked, “Using a scale from zero to ten, where zero is not at all important and ten is extremely important, in your opinion, how important are the protections of equal political access in the current voting rights act for persons of your racial or ethnic background?” the average score among all elected officials was 9. Almost nine in ten officials surveyed said it was “extremely important,” and more than nine in ten Blacks (95%) and American Indians (96%) expressed the most intense support (a score of seven or higher) with Latinos/as and Asian Americans showing lower levels of support (83% and 74%, respectively). Women of color elected officials were even more likely than their male counterparts to support the VRA.<sup>1</sup>

	All	Black	Latino	Asian	Amer. Indian	Men	Women
Overall Importance of VRA Reauthorization (N=1,224)	89	95	83	74	96	88	89
Section 5 Preclearance (N=1,213)	73	77	70	58	67	76	67
Federal Observers (N=1,213)	89	93	85	84	79	90	88

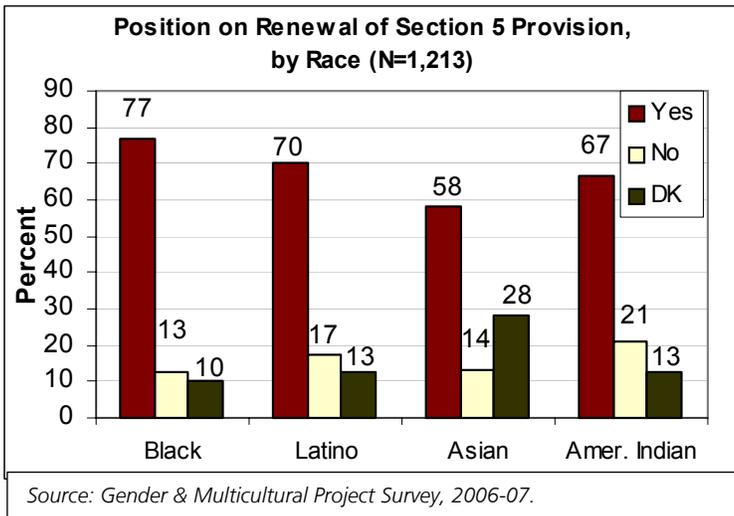
\* Percentages are of those who said 7 or higher on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 indicating that the protections were “extremely important.” Percentages for other provisions are of those who said, “Yes,” when asked if they would like to see the protection renewed.  
Source: Gender & Multicultural Project Survey, 2006-07.

These results show that, as the bill was being debated in Congress during the summer of 2006, when the GMCL Survey was in the field,<sup>2</sup> overwhelming majorities of officials in each of the racial/ethnic group categories judged the Voting Rights Act of considerable importance.

### Section 5 (Preclearance) Provision

The Section 5 (preclearance) provision requires federal approval of proposed changes to voting laws or procedures in covered jurisdictions. A much lower percentage of elected officials in general (73%) supported Section 5 than rated the VRA as very important (89%). For example, whereas almost all of the Black and American Indian elected officials said reauthorization of the VRA was very important, only 77% of Blacks and 67% of American Indians supported the renewal of the Section 5 (preclearance) provision.

Furthermore, striking percentages of each category of officials responded “Don’t Know,” which suggests they do not



understand the components or character of the Section 5 (preclearance) provision. This might imply a problem for the Civil Rights Coalition, which supported the reauthorization of the VRA. Twenty-three percent of Black elected officials either opposed or did not know whether they supported the renewal of Section 5, despite the fact that significant portions (42%) of this group were elected in district elections after voting rights litigation convinced the Congress and the Courts in the 1980s to limit minority vote dilution and the use of at-large elections.

At the same time, the table above shows that support for the renewal of Section 5 is strongest among Blacks, followed by American Indians and Latinos/as. It is lowest, although still a clear majority (58%), among Asian Americans. On gender lines, men were more likely to support preclearance (76%) than women (67%), with almost twice as many women (17%) as men (10%) responding “Don’t know.”

Support for renewal of this provision was still strong, but the lower level of support is problematic given that this is the core provision establishing the legal basis for potentially discriminatory electoral actions of states and localities to be monitored on an ongoing basis by the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. Alternatively, this might be interpreted as based on the fact that the officials, having observed changes in the Bush Justice Department’s CRD, responsible for implementation of Section 5, might view the structure as introducing policies with which they **disagree**.<sup>3</sup>

## Federal Observers

There was strong support across racial groups, and by gender, for renewal of the VRA provision on sending federal observers to polling places where electoral discrimination based on race or color is suspected (see table at top of previous page). Nine in ten of all elected officials surveyed supported renewal of this provision, as did women and men. Strongest support was among Black officials (93%) but overwhelming majorities of Latinos/as (85%), Asian Americans (84%) and American Indians (79%) supported renewal as well.

## Language Minority Protection

Elected officials of color also offered support for Language Minority Protection for citizens in a variety of circumstances (see table below). Eight in ten of all elected officials surveyed favored renewal of bilingual ballots as one of the provisions of the VRA. Support varied somewhat by race and gender with 83% of Latino/a and American Indian officials supporting bilingual ballots compared to 78% of Blacks and Asian Americans; eight in ten of both male and female elected officials favored renewal of this provision.

Officials who had constituents in their districts who spoke another language tended to provide materials in languages other than English. They also supported providing government services in languages other than English. A majority of Latino/a elected officials provided materials to voters in languages other than English, while the other groups, including majorities of men and women, did not provide such materials. Those who provided such materials did so primarily to Spanish-speaking voters; Asian officials offered materials to Spanish, Chinese and Filipino voters. American Indian officials provided materials to speakers of Spanish and of American Indian languages. Only a few of the officials said that they failed to provide these materials because it "did not apply" or because "few voters/residents don't speak English."

While not directly within the provisions of the VRA, we examined views on providing government services in languages other than English. About 60-70% of officials **agreed or strongly agreed** with the provision of services in multiple languages, while about 20% across racial and gender groups opposed this proposal.

The data on the surveyed elected officials' views on voting rights reveals more agreement than division in support for the extension of the Act, on support for Section 5 Preclearance provision, and on bilingual ballot<sup>4</sup> voting rights provisions. Officials varied more distinctly in other related areas; officials offered somewhat less support for providing government services in other languages, and considerably less support in their own provision of "other than English" written materials for their most recent election.

**Support for Language and Voting Access,  
by Race and Gender (%)**

	All	Black	Latino	Asian	Amer. Indian	Men	Women
Bilingual Ballots (N=1,304)	80	78	83	78	83	80	81
Provided Written Materials in Languages Other than English (N=1,348)	32	17	52	46	26	33	31
Gov't services in other languages: Agree/ Strongly Agree (N=1,238)	76	74	79	82	79	77	76

Source: Gender & Multicultural Project Survey, 2006-07.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Women's mean score was 9.3 compared to 9.1; while this difference may seem small, it was statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>2</sup> The VRA Act was scheduled to expire in 2007, but Congress approved its reauthorization in summer 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See recent reporting on former Acting Associate Attorney General Bradley Schlozman who headed the CRD in 2003–2006: "Bush Aide Admits Hiring Boasts; Says He Broke No Rules Giving Jobs to Conservatives," Charlie Savage, *Boston Globe*, 6 June 2007; "Political Hiring in Justice Division Probed," Carol D. Leonnig, *Washington Post*, 21 June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The legislation specifies that under certain circumstances jurisdictions must provide ballots and voter information available in the languages of criteria-specific groups.

## About the Gender & Multicultural Leadership (GMCL) Project

The GMCL Survey is to date the nation's most comprehensive multiracial, multi-office national survey of Black, Latino, Asian, and American Indian elected officials holding positions at the state and local levels. A total of 1,354 elected officials of color were included in this report of the telephone survey conducted between June 5, 2006 and March 21, 2007, by the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) at the University of New Mexico. Seventy-two percent of those public officials who were successfully contacted agreed to participate in the survey. The margin of error for the entire sample is  $\pm 3\%$ .

Besides the survey, other components of the GMCL Project include a **national database** of elected officials of color, by race and gender (as of spring 2006); an annotated **bibliography** and **analytical framework** on the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and class; and a project **website** for public education.

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