



The League of Women Voters
United States Virgin Islands

TESTIMONY PRESENTED TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ELECTIONS
OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

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Thank you for the invitation to testify today on Voting Rights in the US Virgin Islands.

It is disturbing that this great country of ours which was founded on the ideal of government by, of and for the people, is today struggling to uphold one of its founding principles: the democratic rights of its citizens to vote.

It is clear that we must work collectively to prevent the unraveling of this great democracy. The League of Women Voters USA is committed to this mission and for this reason has litigated a number of voting rights cases nationwide.

The Virgin Islands chapter of the League notes that locally we are free of some of the more heinous assaults against citizen rights to vote. I am pleased to report, for example, that we do not have gerrymandering nor blatant purging of voter rolls nor threats of fraud associated with mail-in voting. So, within our Territory, citizens' voting rights are well protected when it comes to local government. Unfortunately, I cannot predict that it will always remain so but I do not foresee signs of any imminent change ahead.

On a parallel note, within the Territories there has been a strong push for the presidential vote. The LWV VI has supported the efforts of Neil Weare in this regard and we will continue to do so.

Besides the presidential vote, however, we are concerned that our congressional representatives do not have a stable vote in Congress beyond the standing committee level. Congress has wrestled with this issue of the delegate vote since 1794. As our Territorial representatives are not Members of the House, they cannot vote on the House floor but can do so in standing committees and only occasionally in the Committee of the Whole, depending on the majority control of the House. Generally, their vote in the Whole is allowed under Democratic control but not under Republican control of the House. What is the rationale there, besides a partisan advantage?

But this can easily be changed in House Rules. The House HAS changed the rules and voting responsibilities of the delegates over the years: from a simple presence in 1794 to a vote now in standing committees, and an occasional vote in the Committee of the Whole. So change has and can continue to happen. It is noteworthy that in some European countries, the

representatives from their Caribbean territories have full voting powers in the national governing assemblies.

If our representatives have been found worthy over the years to be good enough for voting membership in standing committees and occasionally in the Whole, why not within Committee of the Whole on a regular basis, irrespective of partisan control?

At a conference on territorial affairs held in WDC in 1993 when asked about this, a U.S. congressman attending stated that to allow territorial representatives that level of the vote would be tantamount to "a case of the tail wagging the dog".

However, it needs to be pointed out that in that proverbial tail is the population of Puerto Rico which outnumbers the population of some 6 states.

Unfettered, it does smell like the old days of the "Plantation of the South" when the so-called "lesser beings" stood **outside** the House, not good enough to step **inside**. Why are the Territories being treated like "lesser beings" in the US Congress, standing **outside**? Smells also like the language of the Territorial Clause (Article 4 Sec3 Clause 2) which gave Congress the authority to overrule any laws written in the Territories without the consent of the Territories. It was justified at that time, by stating that the (and I use the exact term) "savages" couldn't possibly understand the rule of law and elements of true democracy.

The League of Women Voters of the USVI believes it is about time the American citizens living in its Territories have the same rights given to all U.S citizens.

After all, we have fought in your wars shoulder to shoulder with other US soldiers since we were purchased from Denmark in 1917. Also, the Territories do contribute millions if not billions collectively through special taxes (e.g. rum and gasoline).

However, we recognize that these issues will remain problematic until each territory can clarify its federal relations, until each can determine its political status with the U.S. To do this well in the USVI, we need to have adequate support and the necessary resources to make those decisions. Once done, these issues can be more easily resolved within that new context and through meaningful discussions and compromise with Congress.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this case.

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