

U.S. voting rights renewal hits congressional snag

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civil rights movement, we learned that some things happen in the back room where the deals are made."

Gordon said while most of the public attention is focused on the House, the Senate has been slow to renew the voting measure. Gordon has met with Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), chairman of the Judiciary Committee, to register his concerns.

"The Senate is slowing their roll," Gordon says. "They're not moving this with the sense of urgency that they should."

Civil rights leaders made their comments in a joint appearance before the annual convention of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, a federation of

Stamp sought for N.C. rep

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Edgecombe County resident George Henry White, who represented eastern North Carolina from 1897-1901. The request was co-signed by all 42 members of the Congressional Black Caucus and 12 of 13 House members from North Carolina.

"George Henry White was a mighty force of one," Butterfield said. "Throughout his life he relentlessly stirred the conscience of America to embrace racial justice and equality for all people."

The 15-member CSAC makes recommendations to the Postmaster General on which proposals to consider.

Born a slave in Rosindale, a Bladen County town in 1852, White graduated Howard

University in Washington, D.C. before returning to North Carolina as a school principal in 1877. He was one of the first blacks admitted to the N.C. bar in 1879 and served a term in the state House of Representatives and Senate.

From 1886-94, he was named prosecutor for the second judicial district of North Carolina, the only African American to hold such a position in the U.S.

White, who was elected to Congress in 1896 and re-elected two years later, was the only black member of the House when he left office. He is best known for advocating the federal government take a more aggressive approach to bringing to a halt lynching of blacks in the South. He authored a bill making lynching a federal crime punishable by death, but it was defeated.

"George Henry White's life exemplifies the true spirit of America," Butterfield said. "He is deserving of the distinction of being honored on a U.S. postal stamp."

"George Henry White was a mighty force of one."

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.)

more than 200 black newspapers.

Key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act expire next August. Activists are eager to get the measure extended this year to avert possible last-minute legislative glitches. In a rare show of bipartisanship, Republicans and Democrats, along with President Bush, voiced support for H.R. 9, called the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments of 2006.

"The House Judiciary Committee held 12 hearings on the legislation," said Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.). "Such a period provided more than ample opportunity for House members to review the issue and make their views known. Given how important this is and that it has broad bipartisan support, it's very disappointing for this bill to be pulled from consideration."

The sponsors include Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). The House sponsors include Reps. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Watt, whose district includes

Charlotte.

"In the 1960s, many active citizens struggled hard to convince Congress to pass civil rights legislation that ensured the rights of all — including the right to vote. That victory was a milestone in the history of civil rights. Congress must act to renew the Voting Rights Act of 1965." President Bush said in a Black History month speech at the White House.

Given the broad political support, civil rights leaders and members of the Congressional Black Caucus were stunned last week when a handful of southern Republicans held up the legislation, complaining that the South — the region most covered by the legislation — had been unfairly targeted. However, black political disenfranchisement was common in the Deep South during the early 1960s, when the legislation was first passed.

Opponents of the voting extension argue that it should be nationalized so that one region will not be unfairly burdened. However, civil rights activists say that would only lead to nullifying the measure because, under recent Supreme Court rulings, past discrimination must be established in order for a measure to be held constitutional.

"We have worked extremely hard over a number of

months to reach bipartisan and bicameral agreement on this legislation and had reason to believe it would be considered expeditiously," CBC Chairman Mel Watt said in statement. "The Voting Rights Act has always had strong support from Democrats and Republicans alike. We fear that pulling the bill could send the wrong message about whether the bill enjoys broad bipartisan support and that delaying consideration until after the July 4 recess could give those with partisan intentions space and time to politicize the issue."

Even some Republicans are baffled by the holdup.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) says the bill was crafted after months of studying more than 12,000 pages of testimony that indicated there is much work to be done in assuring non-discrimination.

"Some members, whom I believe are misinformed, have expressed concerns about voting on this legislation now," Sensenbrenner said. "I stand by this bipartisan legislation. H.R. 9 is a good bill."

Congress first amended and strengthened the Voting Rights Act in 1982, when it was first set to expire, and then extended it for 25 years

—until 2007. Key sections are set to expire next year. One is the pre-clearance clause of Section 5, requiring all or parts of 16 states with a history of discrimination to submit any changes in voting procedures to the Department of Justice for approval before they can take effect.

Those states are: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Virginia. The state, county or local governments must prove to federal authorities that voting changes do not have racially discriminatory purposes and that they will not make racial minority vot-

ers worse off than they were prior to the change. The attorney general can then prevent a change by issuing an objection, which can be challenged in the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Section 5 also requires federal poll watchers to be onsite during voting.

Section 203, which requires voting precincts to eliminate any language barriers, is also up for renewal.

Some civil rights leaders had predicted trouble. Jesse Jackson Sr. said during the 40th anniversary of the act last year: "The forces that we defeated in 1965 never stopped trying to take it back... They never stop."

Herbert L. White of The Charlotte Post contributed.

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