



www.ridemocrats.org

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 5, 2015

CONTACTS:

Ann S. Gooding, R.I. Democratic Party
401.272.3367 agooding@ridemocrats.org
Twitter #VRA50

Hon. Nellie Gorbea, R.I. Secretary of State
401.222.2457

CHAIR McNAMARA INTERVIEWS R.I.'s SECRETARY of STATE NELLIE GORBEA on 50th ANNIVERSARY OF VOTING RIGHTS ACT

On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the landmark [Voting Rights Act](#), which sought to fulfill the promise of the 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution – to prevent denial or obstruction of any American's right to vote.

Today, on the historic 50th anniversary, Representative Joseph M. McNamara, chair of the Rhode Island Democratic Party, interviews Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea about the significance of that Act, efforts made in recent years to fulfill that law, and current steps being to further that work.

Q: Secretary Gorbea, thank you for your time today. On behalf of all Rhode Islanders, we thank you for your work to protect and preserve every American's rightful opportunity to have their voices heard at the ballot box. Please briefly share with us your priorities in this area, since taking office this January.

A: *Thank you for this opportunity. The Rhode Island Department of State engages and empowers all Rhode Islanders. One of the ways we are accomplishing this is by ensuring that elections are fair, fast and accurate. That's why I introduced legislation this year, the Voting and Elections Modernization Act, which would expand opportunities for Rhode Island voters to participate in the democratic process. This includes allowing online voter registration, having Rhode Island join the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), a multi-state consortium designed to clean up our voter rolls and identify eligible yet unregistered Rhode Island voters. I was also very pleased to begin the procurement process for new voting equipment, as our current machines have been in use since 1997.*

Q: On this 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, please tell us what this means to you as our Secretary of State.

A: *The Voting Rights Act broke down significant barriers that prevented African Americans, Latinos and other under-represented groups from freely exercising their right to vote. Unfortunately, in recent years jurisdictions across the country have moved to enact laws that are undermining much of the progress achieved under the Voting Rights Act. It is imperative that we protect all Americans' right to vote.*

Q: Why, in your view, is the power to vote so fundamental to our democracy?

A: *The right to vote is the most important right granted to our citizens. It is the foundation of our democratic process. When we look back at history, from the Colonial era struggle against taxation without representation to the Dorr Rebellion right here in Rhode Island and, in more recent times, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the fight against voter disenfranchisement has been a constant priority across American society.*

Q: As a respected state office holder, and proudly, this nation's first Latina Secretary of State, what does this anniversary signify to you personally, and do you assume for Latinos and other immigrants nationwide?

A: *The 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act is an important milestone for all Americans. We need to use this moment to look back at the progress that has been made and commit ourselves to ensuring that the protections afforded by the Voting Rights Act are not eroded. That is why it is important that Congress pass the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2015.*

Q: Since 2013, more than 25 states have passed 'commonsense laws' to expand access to the ballot box, while another 15 have passed or enacted laws that limit access. As Rhode Island's Secretary of State, what steps have you taken to ensure that access to the ballot box is not restricted?

A: *We are working on replacing our voting equipment, which is nearly 20 years old. Having modern and reliable voting equipment is essential to ensuring fair, fast and accurate elections. This equipment is the infrastructure for our democratic process. The voting equipment we obtain will offer opportunities to explore new and innovative ways of expanding access to voting. In order to make sure we make the best decision possible, I have enlisted a diverse group of stakeholders in helping us write the requirements of our new voting system. I am also working closely with legislative leaders to submit the Voting and Elections Modernization Act in the next session.*

Q: The Voting and Elections Modernization Act would expand voter rights through online voter registration. Can you explain what that is and what its impact is? Also, how common is this nationwide?

A: *Online voter registration will provide Rhode Islanders with a convenient, secure, and cost-effective online method to register to vote or update their voter registration information. The voter's information is verified with driver's license or state ID information from the Division of Motor Vehicles. This saves the voter time and saves taxpayer dollars by reducing the administrative burden placed on local elections officials. Currently, a total of 21 states offer online voter registration and another six have passed legislation to allow for online voter registration.*

Q: I know you had other areas of voting protections in mind, such as early in-person voting and a system to help clean up our voter rolls. Can you describe these?

A: *Our democratic process has not caught up with the changes and challenges of today's modern society and, as a result, voter participation continues to decline even though more money than ever is spent on elections. My proposed legislation addressed this by expanding the opportunity for Rhode Islanders to vote early by extending the existing emergency mail ballot provision and renaming it what it really is – in-person, early voting. Thirty two states have passed in-person early voting laws and twenty-two of these offer early in-person voting on weekends.*

We also are in the process of joining the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). This is a non-profit organization with the sole mission of assisting states to improve the accuracy of America's voter rolls and increase access to voter registration for all eligible citizens. ERIC provides Rhode Island with the opportunity to ensure our voter rolls are accurate and help prevent voter fraud, while also saving our state significant dollars in unnecessary printing and mailing costs. Currently, 13 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to join ERIC and several states, like Rhode Island are actively moving forward to join the initiative.

Q: Finally, why should anyone care about protecting the right to vote for any U.S. citizen and what can we all do to support this effort?

A:

Our individual right to vote is the foundation of our democratic process. This is particularly significant in a small state like Rhode Island. After weathering considerable challenges, Rhode Islanders are ready to turn the page, realize our state's full potential, and build a future of opportunities for all. If we are serious about creating opportunities for all Rhode Islanders, we must start by ensuring that more Rhode Islanders are empowered to play a role in that turn-around. And that begins with voting.

CHAIR: Thank you, Madame Secretary, and we join you in heralding this important milestone in American democracy and look forward to a day when we don't have to mark it, because it will be something that is an accepted matter of course.

For more information on Secretary Gorbea's work in this area visit www.sos.gov.ri and for information about the R.I. Democratic Party visit www.ridemocrats.org.

COVERAGE INVITED

###