

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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**Attorney General Racine Calls for Renewed Commitment on 50th
Anniversary of Selma Marches and Voting Rights Act**
AG Notes that District's Struggle for Full Representation Is Ongoing

WASHINGTON, D. C. – Attorney General Karl A. Racine today marked the 50th anniversary of the Selma Marches with a call for all Americans – and particularly for District residents – to bring renewed urgency to the cause of voting rights.

“I recently heard a story about an African-American who, in the years before the Voting Rights Act, was attempting to prove in a Southern court that he had been illegally disenfranchised,” Attorney General Racine said. **“But, because he was black in an era when many states barred African Americans from testifying in court against whites, this gentleman had to get a white registered voter to vouch for him. The judge threatened the white witness with perjury. Thank God we no longer live in a country where such egregious prejudice is enshrined in law.”**

Saturday marked the 50th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” – the day that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil-rights protesters first attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in downtown Selma, Alabama, and were violently turned back by local and state law-enforcement officers. National and international news coverage of officials’ savagery against peaceful marchers and other horrific acts of racism turned the nation’s focus toward the significant barriers that African-American residents in Selma and many other places in the South faced when attempting to register to vote.

On March 15, 1965 – partially in response to the publicity surrounding the protests – President Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act in a historic televised speech before a joint session of Congress. After securing protection from federal officials, marchers succeeded in crossing the bridge on March 21, 1965, en route to the state capital of Montgomery. The Voting Rights Act passed Congress and was signed into law later that year.

“Fifty years ago this month, a group of extraordinary Americans stood up for themselves and others and demanded one of the most basic rights to which they were guaranteed under the Constitution: the right to

vote,” Attorney General Racine said. “Because of their brilliant and disciplined strategy of nonviolence and the strength and moral clarity of their message, they ultimately succeeded – with the number of registered African-American voters increasing by nearly 250,000 in 1965 alone. Today, across the South and the nation, there are thousands of African-Americans serving as members of Congress, governors, judges, sheriffs, state legislators, mayors and other elected officials. All Americans owe the Selma protesters a great debt of gratitude.”

The Attorney General continued: **“Nonetheless, today, the gains that the Voting Rights Act made possible are threatened – by court decisions striking at that law’s very heart as well as by attempts in many states to limit, rather than expand, access to the polls.”**

He concluded: **“As President Obama eloquently put it in his speech in Selma on Saturday: ‘When it comes to the pursuit of justice, we can afford neither complacency nor despair.’ Although we in the District of Columbia have a much greater measure of home rule than we did 50 years ago, today the 660,000 residents of the nation’s capital remain completely devoid of a voting voice in Congress. Moreover, even the decisions of our local elected representatives who do have a voting say in our own legislation and budget are still subject to approval and veto by a Congress in which our only Congresswoman has no vote. A full half-century after President Johnson stood in the Capitol and demanded equal access to voting rights for all of our citizens, the Americans who live in the very shadow of its dome are still denied representation. This should outrage every District resident and every American who believes in democracy.”**

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