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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 55

Offered January 8, 2020

Prefiled January 8, 2020

Commemorating the 150th anniversary of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Patrons—McClellan, Barker, Bell, Boysko, Chafin, Chase, Cosgrove, Deeds, DeSteph, Dunnavant, Ebbin, Edwards, Favola, Hanger, Hashmi, Howell, Kiggans, Lewis, Locke, Lucas, Marsden, Mason, McDougle, McPike, Morrissey, Newman, Norment, Obenshain, Peake, Petersen, Pillion, Ruff, Saslaw, Spruill, Stanley, Stuart, Suetterlein and Vogel; Delegates: Aird, Askew, Ayala, Bagby, Bourne, Bulova, Carr, Carroll Foy, Cole, J.G., Davis, Hayes, Herring, Hurst, Jenkins, Jones, Lindsey, McQuinn, Price, Rasoul, Sickles, Torian, Tyler and Ware

WHEREAS, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was ratified 150 years ago, on February 3, 1870, forbidding the denial of United States citizens' right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" and providing constitutionally for the right to vote for African American men; and

WHEREAS, the nation's founders asserted in the United States Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness"; but these ideals did not extend to enslaved persons, formerly enslaved persons, or their descendants; and

WHEREAS, the Thirteenth Amendment, ratified on December 6, 1865, formally encoded the abolition of slavery, an institution that spanned nearly 250 years in the British colonies and the new nation; the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified on July 9, 1868, granted citizenship to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States" and required equal protection under the law for all persons within the states' jurisdiction; and

WHEREAS, the Fifteenth Amendment was the last of the three Reconstruction Amendments passed in the wake of the American Civil War to build a foundation for the newly reunited nation, inclusive of rights for formerly enslaved persons and their descendants; and

WHEREAS, the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and the granting of the right to vote to African American men enabled the election of African American legislators to the General Assembly, to both the Senate and the House of Delegates, and enabled African American Virginians to have a voice in Virginia's legislature; and

WHEREAS, the right to vote and the power it afforded to African American voters was resisted, particularly in the American South, and in spite of the constitutionally guaranteed right, African American voters were deliberately disenfranchised, including by Jim Crow laws that included poll taxes and literacy tests designed to make the polls inaccessible to African American voters; and

WHEREAS, the suppression of the vote disenfranchised African Americans for decades following Reconstruction, such that in Virginia no African Americans were elected to the General Assembly from 1890 until 1969; and

WHEREAS, the right to vote guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment had to be continually fought for following Reconstruction and through the Civil Rights Movement, and such right was encoded again in the form of the Twenty-fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, ratified in 1964, abolishing poll taxes, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting discriminatory voting practices; and

WHEREAS, the right of citizens to vote is a fundamental component of American democracy, a right that has historically been denied and suppressed, and a right that must be continually defended and protected; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly hereby commemorate the 150th anniversary of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate transmit a copy of this resolution to the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Chairman and Executive Director of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the Chancellor of the Virginia Community College System, the Executive Director of the Virginia State Conference NAACP, and the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia, requesting that they further disseminate copies of this resolution to their respective constituents so that they may be apprised of the sense of the General Assembly of Virginia in this matter.

INTRODUCED

SJS