

Black History Issue 2003

A black civil rights leader recently told an assembly at Michigan State University that American democracy was only decades old rather than centuries- that not until the 1965 Voting Rights Act when blacks could vote did democracy truly begin. [1]

Such a declaration does not accurately portray the history of black voting in America nor does it honor the thousands of blacks who sacrificed their lives obtaining the right to vote and who exercised that right as long as two centuries ago. In fact, most today are completely unaware that it was not Democrats but was actually Republicans-” like the seven pictured on the front cover-” who not only helped achieve the passage of explicit constitutional voting rights for blacks in 1870 but who also held hundreds of elected offices during the 1800s. [2]

Black Voting in the 1700s

Acknowledgment that blacks voted long before the 1965 Voting Rights Act was provided in the infamous 1856 Dred Scott decision in which a Democratic-controlled US Supreme Court observed that blacks “had no rights which a white man was bound to respect; and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.” [3] Non-Democrat Justice Benjamin R. Curtis, one of only two on the Court who dissented in that opinion, provided a lengthy documentary history to show that many blacks in America had often exercised the rights of citizens-” that many at the time of the American Revolution “possessed the franchise of [voters] on equal terms with other citizens.” [4]

State constitutions protecting voting rights for blacks included those of Delaware (1776), [5] Maryland (1776), [6] New Hampshire (1784), [7] and New York (1777). [8] (Constitution signer Rufus King declared that in New York, “a citizen of color was entitled to all the privileges of a citizen. . . . [and] entitled to vote.”) [9] Pennsylvania also extended such rights in her 1776 constitution, [10] as did Massachusetts in her 1780 constitution. [11] In fact, nearly a century later in 1874, US Rep. Robert Brown Elliott (a black Republican from SC) queried: “When did Massachusetts sully her proud record by placing on her statute-book any law which admitted to the ballot the white man and shut out the black man? She has never done it; she will not do it.” [12]

As a result of these provisions, early American towns such as Baltimore had more blacks than whites voting in elections; [13] and when the proposed US Constitution was placed before citizens in 1787 and 1788, it was ratified by both black and white voters in a number of States. [14]

This is not to imply that all blacks were allowed to vote; free blacks could vote (except in South Carolina) but slaves were not permitted to vote in any State. Yet in many States this was not an issue, for many worked to end slavery during and after the American Revolution. Although Great Britain had prohibited the abolition of slavery in the Colonies before the Revolution, [15] as independent States they were free to end slavery-” as occurred in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York. [16] Additionally, blacks in many early States not only had the right to vote but also the right to hold office. [17]

Congressional Actions

In the early years of the Republic, the federal Congress also moved toward ending slavery and thus toward achieving voting rights for all blacks, not just free blacks. For example, in 1789 Congress banned slavery in any federally held territory; in 1794, [18] the exportation of slaves from any State was banned; [19] and in 1808, the importation of slaves into any State was also banned. [20] In fact, more progress was made to end slavery and achieve civil rights for blacks in America at that time than was made in any other nation in the world. [21]

In 1820, however, following the death of most of the Founding Fathers, a new generation of leaders in Congress halted and reversed this early progress through acts such as the Missouri Compromise, which permitted the admission of new slave-holding States. [22] This policy was loudly lamented and strenuously opposed by the few Founders remaining alive. Elias Boudinot—"a president of Congress during the Revolution—" warned that this new direction by Congress would bring "an end to the happiness of the United States." [23] A frail John Adams feared that lifting the slavery prohibition would destroy America; [24] and an elderly Jefferson was appalled at the proposal, declaring, "In the gloomiest moment of the Revolutionary War, I never had any apprehensions equal to what I feel from this source." [25] Congress also enacted the Fugitive Slave Law allowing southern slavers to go North and kidnap blacks on the spurious claim that they were runaway slaves [26] and then passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, allowing slavery into what is now Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska. [27]

This new anti-civil rights attitude in Congress was also reflected in many of the Southern and Mid-Atlantic States. For example, in 1835 North Carolina reversed its policies and limited voting to whites only, [28] as also occurred in Maryland in 1809. [29]

Political Parties

The Democratic Party had become the dominant political party in America in the 1820s, [30] and in May 1854, in response to the strong pro-slavery positions of the Democrats, several anti-slavery Members of Congress formed an anti-slavery party—"the Republican Party." [31] It was founded upon the principles of equality originally set forth in the governing documents of the Republic. In an 1865 publication documenting the history of black voting rights, Philadelphia attorney John Hancock confirmed that the Declaration of Independence set forth "equal rights to all. It contains not a word nor a clause regarding color. Nor is there any provision of the kind to be found in the Constitution of the United States." [32]

The original Republican platform in 1856 had only nine planks—"six of which were dedicated to ending slavery and securing equal rights for African-Americans." [33] The Democratic platform of that year took an opposite position and defended slavery, even warning that "all efforts of the abolitionists [those opposed to slavery]. . . are calculated to lead to the most alarming and dangerous consequences and . . . diminish the happiness of the people and endanger the stability and permanency of the Union." [34] The next Democratic platform (1860) endorsed both the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott decision; [35] Democrats even distributed copies of the Dred Scott ruling to justify their anti-black positions. [36]

Specific Constitutional Rights for African-Americans

When Abraham Lincoln was elected the first Republican President in 1861 (along with the first ever Republican Congress), southern pro-slavery Democrats saw the handwriting on the wall. They left the Union and took their States with them, forming a brand new nation: the Confederate States of America, and their followers became known as Rebels. During the War, Lincoln implemented the first anti-slavery measures since the early Republic: in 1862, he abolished slavery in Washington, DC; [37] in 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, ordering slaves to be freed in southern States that had not already done so; [38] in 1864, he signed several early civil rights bills; [39] etc. After the war ended in 1865, the Republican Congress passed the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery and the 14th Amendment providing full civil rights for all blacks, thus fulfilling the original promise of the Declaration of Independence.

Most southern States ignored these new Amendments. [40] Congress therefore insisted that the southern States ratify and implement these Amendments before they could be readmitted into the United States. [41]

Until their readmission, the civil rights of the Rebels in the South—"including their right to vote in elections—" were suspended. [42] The Constitution authorizes that certain civil rights may be suspended "in cases of rebellion" or when "the public safety may require it" (Art. I, Sec. 9, cl. 2). In fact, because the Rebels had taken up arms against their own nation—"an act of treason according to the Constitution ("Treason against the United States shall consist only in levying war against them . . ." Art. III, Sec. 3, cl.

1), they could have been executed (Art. III, Sec. 3, cl. 2). Instead, amnesty was granted to the Rebels if they took an oath of fidelity to the United States, which most eventually did. (Regrettably, after their readmission, and after Democrats regained the State legislatures from Republicans, those States worked aggressively to circumvent the 14th Amendment in violation of the pledge [43] they had taken.)

Because the Rebels (who had almost exclusively been Democrats) were not allowed to vote in the early parts of Reconstruction, Republicans became the political majority in the South; and since nearly every African-American was a Republican and could now vote, most southern legislatures—"at least for a few years—" became Republican and included many black legislators. In Texas, 42 blacks were elected to the State Legislature, [44] 50 to the South Carolina Legislature, [45] 127 to Louisiana's, [46] 99 to Alabama's, [47] etc.—" all as Republicans. These Republican legislatures moved quickly to protect voting rights for blacks, prohibit segregation, establish public education, and open public transportation, State police, juries, and other institutions to blacks. [48] (It is noteworthy that the blacks serving both in the federal and State legislatures during that time forgivingly voted for amnesty for the Rebels. [49])

During the time when most southern Democrats had not yet signed the oath of fidelity to the United States and therefore could not vote, they still found ways to intimidate and keep blacks from voting. For example, in 1865-1866, the Ku Klux Klan was formed by Democrats to overthrow Republicans and pave the way for Democrats to regain control [50]—" as when Democrats attacked the State Republican Convention in Louisiana in 1866, killing 40 blacks, 20 whites, and wounding 150 others. [51] In addition to the use of force, southern Democrats also relied on absurd technicalities to limit blacks. In Georgia, 28 black legislators were elected as Republicans, but Democratic officials decided that even though blacks had the right to vote in Georgia, they did not have the right to hold office; the 28 black members were therefore expelled. [52]

Because of such blatant attempts to nullify the guarantees of the 14th Amendment, the Republican Congress passed the 15th Amendment to give explicit voting rights to African-Americans. Significantly, not one of the 56 Democrats serving in Congress at that time voted for the 15th Amendment. [53]

Democratic Efforts to Limit Voting Rights for Blacks

During Reconstruction (1865-1877), Republicans passed four federal civil rights bills to protect the rights of African-Americans, the fourth being passed in 1875. [54] It was nearly a century before the next civil rights bill was passed, because in 1876 Democrats regained partial control of Congress and successfully blocked further progress. As Democrats regained control of the legislatures in southern States, they began to repeal State civil rights protections and to abrogate existing federal civil rights laws. As African-American US Rep. John Roy Lynch (MS) noted, "The opposition to civil rights in the South is confined almost exclusively to States under democratic control . . ." [55]

Devious and cunning methods were required to circumvent the explicit voting protections of the 14th and 15th Amendments, and southern Democrats implemented nearly a dozen separate devices to prevent blacks from voting, including:

- Poll taxes
- Literacy tests
- "Grandfather" clauses
- Suppressive election procedures
- Black codes and enforced segregation
- Bizarre gerrymandering
- White-only primaries
- Physical intimidation and violence
- Restrictive eligibility requirements
- Rewriting of State constitutions

1. The poll tax

The poll tax was a fee paid by a voter before he could vote. The fee was high enough that most poor were unable to pay the tax and therefore unable to vote. Although the poll tax affected both whites and blacks, it was disproportionately hard on blacks who were just emerging from slavery, many of whom had not yet established an independent means of living. A poll tax was first proposed in Texas in 1874, right after Democrats reclaimed power from the Republicans, [56] but it was North Carolina in 1876 that became the first State to enact a poll tax, [57] and other southern States quickly followed. [58]

2. Literacy tests

Literacy tests required a voter to demonstrate a certain level of learning proficiency before he could vote. In some cases, the test was 20 pages long for blacks, and those administering the tests were white Democrats who nearly always ruled that blacks were illiterate. In Alabama, the test included questions such as, "Where do presidential electors cast ballots for president?" "Name the rights a person has after he has been indicted by a grand jury." [59] Democrats required blacks to have an above average education before they could vote but then simultaneously opposed black education and even worked with the Ku Klux Klan to burn down schools attended by blacks. [60] Clearly, they did not intend for blacks to vote.

3. "Grandfather" clauses

"Grandfather" clauses were laws passed by Democratic legislatures allowing an individual to vote if his father or grandfather had been registered to vote prior to the passage of the 15th Amendment. [61] Since voting in the South prior to the 15th Amendment was almost completely by whites, this law ensured that poor and illiterate whites, but not blacks, could vote.

4. Suppressive election procedures

Some election procedures (such as "multiple ballots") were intentionally made complex and misleading. For example, a Republican voter might be required to cast a ballot in up to eight separate locations-" or sometimes to cast a vote for each Republican on the ballot at a separate location-" before the ballot would be counted. Democratic officials, however, often failed to inform black voters of this complicated procedure and their ballots were therefore disqualified. [62]

5. Black codes and enforced segregation

Black Codes (later called Jim Crow laws) restricted the freedoms and economic opportunities of blacks. For example, in the four years from 1865-1869, southern Democrats passed "Black Codes" to prohibit blacks from voting, holding office, owning property, entering towns without permission, serving on juries, or racially intermarrying. [63]

National observers at that time concluded that the South was simply trying to institute a new form of slavery through these Black Codes. [64] This tactic was obvious to African-Americans, thus causing black US Rep. Joseph H. Rainey (Republican from SC) to quip: "I can only say that we love freedom more-" vastly more-" than slavery; consequently we hope to keep clear of the Democrats!" [65]

Southern Democrats went well beyond Black Codes, however, and also imposed forced racial segregation. In 1875, Tennessee became the first State to do so, [66] and by 1890 several other southern States had followed. [67] As a result, schools, hospitals, public transportation, restaurants, etc., became segregated. (Even though the Republican Congress had already passed laws banning segregation, the US Supreme Court struck down those anti-segregation laws in a series of decisions in the 1870s and 1880s. [68])

6. Bizarre gerrymandering

Once the Democrats regained State legislatures at the end of Reconstruction, they began to redraw election lines to make it impossible for Republicans to be elected, thereby preventing blacks from being elected. [69] For example, although many blacks were elected as Republicans in Texas during

Reconstruction, when the last African-American left the State House in 1897, none was elected (either as a Republican or a Democrat) for the next 70 years until federal courts ordered a change in the way Texas Democrats drew voting lines. [70] Furthermore, although Republicans had been an overwhelming majority in the State legislature during Reconstruction, after Democrats redrew election lines, for several decades there were never more than two Republicans serving in the House nor one in the Senate. [71] This pattern was typical in other southern States as well.

7. White-only primaries

Another way Democrats could keep blacks from being elected was by enacting Democratic Party policies prohibiting blacks from voting in their primaries. When Texas later codified this policy into State law, the US Supreme Court struck down that Texas law in 1927, [72] but not the party policies. The Democratic Parties in Georgia, [73] Louisiana, [74] Florida, [75] Mississippi, [76] South Carolina, [77] etc., therefore continued their reliance on white-only primaries. Because Democrats solidly controlled every level of government in the South (often called the “solid Democratic South” [78]), this policy had the same effect as a State law and again ensured that no black would be elected. In 1935, the Supreme Court upheld this Democratic policy [79] but then reversed itself and finally struck it down in 1944. [80]

8. Physical intimidation and violence

In 1871, black US Rep. Robert Brown Elliott (Republican from SC) observed that: “the declared purpose [of the Democratic party is] to defeat the ballot with the bullet and other coercive means. . . . The white Republican of the South is also hunted down and murdered or scourged for his opinion’s sake, and during the past two years more than six hundred loyal [Republican] men of both races have perished in my State alone.” [81] Elliott’s term “coercive means” accurately described the lynchings as well as the cross burnings, church burnings, incarceration on trumped-up charges, beatings, rape, murder, etc.

The Ku Klux Klan was a leader in this form of violent intimidation by Democrats. As African-American US Rep. James T. Rapier (Republican from al) explained in 1874, Democrats “were hunting me down as the partridge on the mount, night and day, with their Ku Klux Klan, simply because I was a Republican and refused to bow at the foot of their Baal.” [82]

Of all forms of violent intimidation, lynchings were by far the most effective. Between 1882 and 1964, 4,743 persons were lynched— 3,446 blacks and 1,297 whites. [83] Why were so many more blacks lynched than whites? According to African-American Rep. John R. Lynch (Republican from SC), “More colored than white men are thus persecuted simply because they constitute in larger numbers the opposition to the Democratic Party.” [84]

Republicans often led the effort to pass federal anti-lynching laws, [85] but Democrats successfully blocked every anti-lynching bill. For example, in 1921, Republican Rep. Leonidas Dyer (MO) introduced a federal anti-lynching bill in Congress, but Democrats in the Senate killed it. [86] The NAACP reported on December 17, 1921, that: “since the introduction of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in Congress on April 11, 1921, there have been 28 persons murdered by lynchings in the United States.” [87] Although some Democrats introduced anti-lynching bills across the decades, their Democratic leaders killed every effort and Congress never did pass an anti-lynching bill. [88]

9. Restrictive eligibility requirements

Election policies designed to limit black voting included requirements that a voter must reside in a state for two years, his county for one year, and his ward or precinct for six months before he could vote. [89] This requirement especially limited the effect of workers seeking employment— often blacks. After the poll tax was abolished, some States, still trying to achieve the same effect, enacted annual registration fees for voters. The lower courts struck down such fees in 1971; [90] in 1972 the Supreme Court struck down the excessive filing fees established by Democratic legislatures; [91] these fees were designed to prevent what the Supreme Court had termed the “less affluent segment of the community” [92] from participating as candidates.

10. Rewriting of State constitutions

As a part of Reconstruction, most southern States had been required to rewrite their State constitutions to add full civil rights protections. [93] However, less than two decades later, many States revised their constitutions to remove those clauses. For example, in 1868 North Carolina had rewritten its constitution to include civil rights, [94] but in 1876 it amended its constitution to exclude most blacks from voting. [95] Over the next two decades, Democrats in Mississippi, [96] South Carolina, [97] Louisiana, [98] Florida, [99] Alabama, [100] and Virginia [101] also altered their constitutions or passed laws to negate many of the rights given to blacks during Reconstruction.

11. Other requirements

Other restrictions used by Democrats to keep blacks from voting included property ownership requirements. For example, in Alabama in 1901, a voter was required to own land or property worth at least \$300 before he could vote [102] (today that would equate to more than \$6,500. [103]) Some States would withhold voting rights for the “commission” of a crime-” not for a serious crime or a felony but rather for violating any of a long list of petty offenses (unemployed blacks or those looking for work were often charged with vagrancy, resulting in a loss of their voting rights). [104]

An Historical Sidenote

Current writers and texts addressing the post-Civil War period often present an incomplete portrayal of that era. For example, africana.com notes: “Southerners established whites-only voting in party primaries . . . or gerrymandered electoral districts, thus diluting the strength of black voters.” [105] Although it is true that both whites and southerners were the overwhelming source of difficulties for African-Americans, it was just one type of southern whites that caused the problems: southern racist whites. There was another type of southern whites: the non-racist whites, many of whom suffered great persecutions and even loss of life for supporting blacks. These whites are often unrecognized or unacknowledged in black history and are wrongly grouped with racist whites through the use of the overly broad terms such as “southerners” or “whites.” To make an accurate portrayal of black history, a distinction must be made between types of whites.

For example, the Rev. Richard Allen (1760-1831), a founder of the AME church in America, suffered many injuries at the hands of “whites”: he was a slave, his mother and brothers were sold separately and his family was split by his master, Allen was opposed by prominent Gospel ministers, etc. Yet Allen understood that only some whites were hostile. In fact, in his own memoirs, Allen openly acknowledges whites who helped him. For example, Allen writes to other blacks: “I hope the name of Dr. Benjamin Rush [a white signer of the Declaration] and Robert Ralston [a white wealthy merchant] will never be forgotten among us. They were the first two gentlemen who espoused the cause of the oppressed and aided us in building the house of the Lord for the poor Africans to worship in.” [106] Allen also notes that in 1784 when he started his first church in Philadelphia, “there were but few colored people in the neighborhood-” the most of my congregation was white.” [107] Such positive portrayals of black/white relations are too often missing from black history pieces today; instead, “whites” are described as oppressors. Some were; some were not.

Another illustration is provided by the passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments. Constitutional amendments must be passed by a margin of two-thirds in Congress and ratified by three-fourths of the States. Those Amendments abolishing slavery and providing civil rights and voting rights for African-Americans were passed by two-thirds of the white men in Congress and by white men in the legislature of three-fourths of the States-” an overwhelming majority of these white men were Republicans and were not racists. (Among the literally hundreds of whites voting for these amendments were two African-American Republicans elected in Massachusetts in 1866. [108])

Therefore, the africana.com quote would be much more historically correct-” although more politically incorrect-” were it to read: “Democratic legislatures in the South [instead of just “southerners”] established

whites-only voting in party primaries . . .” This weakness of distinction is typical of far too many black history writings addressing the post-Reconstruction era.

An Obvious Purpose

It is clear that many southern Democrats despised blacks and Republicans and used every possible means to keep them from power. This hostility was evident in the numerous devices they used-” including violence. In fact, after examining the abundant evidence, Republican US Sen. Roscoe Conkling (nominated as a US Supreme Court Justice in 1882) concluded that the Democratic Party was determined to exterminate blacks in those States where Democratic supremacy was threatened. [109]

The Democrats’ hostility was evident not only in their actions but also in the words they used to describe blacks and Republicans. Democrats applied epithets that were at that time considered base, vulgar, and derogatory-” terms such as “scalawags” (those in the South who had opposed succession) [110] or “radicals” (early Republicans were considered radical because their party was bi-racial and because they allowed blacks to vote and participate in the political process). [111]

Clearly, because Republicans embraced and welcomed blacks as equals, Democrats abhorred and bitterly opposed them. As black US Rep. Richard H. Cain (Republican from SC) explained in 1875: “The bad blood of the South comes because the Negroes are Republicans. If they would only cease to be Republicans and vote the straight-out Democratic ticket there would be no trouble. Then the bad blood would sink entirely out of sight.” [112] Many Democrats today-” including many black Democrats-” have picked up the Democrats’ long-standing hatred for Republicans without understanding its origins. They often blame that generations-long contempt on issues other than the anti-black, anti-Republican sentiments that shaped their Party, but history is clear.

Fighting the Constitution

Decades after the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, many Democrats still steadfastly opposed those protections. In 1900, Democrat US Sen. Ben Tillman (SC) declared: “We made up our minds that the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution were themselves null and void; that the [civil rights] acts of Congress . . . were null and void; that oaths required by such laws were null and void.” [113] Democrats such as Rep. W. Bourke Cockran (NY), Sen. John Tyler Morgan (AL), Sen. Samuel McEnery (LA), and others agreed with this position and were among the Democrats seeking a repeal of the 15th Amendment (voting rights for African-Americans). [114] In fact, Sen. McEnery even declared: “I believe . . . that not a single southern Senator would object to such a move” [115] (of the 22 southern Senators, 20 were Democrats [116]).

Effect on Black Voting

Unrelenting efforts by Democrats to suppress black voting were successful. Eventually, in Selma, Alabama, the voting rolls were 99 percent white and 1 percent black even though there were more black residents than whites in that city; [117] and in Birmingham-” a city with 18,000 blacks-” only 30 of them were eligible to vote. [118] Black voters in Alabama and Florida were reduced by nearly 90 percent, [119] and in Texas from 100,000 to only 5,000. [120] By the 1940s, only 5 percent of blacks in the south were registered to vote. [121]

More Recent Civil Rights Efforts

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, a few Democratic leaders began to oppose their own party’s policies against blacks. Democratic President Harry S. Truman from Missouri was perhaps the first and most vocal national Democratic leader to advocate strong civil rights protections, [122] yet his party rejected his efforts. [123] Reformers such as Truman learned that it was a difficult task for rank-and-file Democrats to reshape their long-held views on race.

In fact, in 1924 when Texas Democratic candidate for Governor, Ma Ferguson, ran against the Democratic Ku Klux Klan candidate in the primary, it cost her the widespread support of the Texas Democratic Party. [124] Democrat Franklin Roosevelt understood his Party, however, and in his 1932 race he made subtle overtures to blacks but avoided making any overt civil rights promises. FDR was so unsuccessful in this approach that his Republican opponent, Herbert Hoover, received over 75 percent of the black vote in that election. [125]

Unlike FDR, Harry Truman worked boldly and openly to change his party. In 1946, he became the first modern President to institute a comprehensive review of race relations and, not surprisingly, faced strenuous opposition from within his own party. In fact, Democratic Sen. Theodore Bilbo (MS) admonished every "red blooded Anglo Saxon man in Mississippi to resort to any means" to keep blacks from voting. [126] Nonetheless, Truman pushed forward and introduced an aggressive civil rights legislative package that included an anti-lynching law, an anti-poll tax law, desegregation of the military, etc., but his own party killed all of his proposals. [127]

Southern Democratic Governors, denouncing Truman's proposals, met in Florida and proposed what they called a "southern conference of true Democrats" to plan their strategy. [128] That summer at the Democratic National Convention when Truman placed strong civil rights language in the national Democratic platform, a walkout of southern delegates resulted. Southern Democrats then formed the Dixiecrat Party and ran South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond as their candidate for President. [129] (It was concerning this 1948 presidential bid by Thurmond that Republican Sen. Trent Lott (MS) uttered his disgraceful comments [130] that made national news.) Thurmond's bid was unsuccessful; he later had a change of heart on civil rights and in 1964 left the Democratic Party. In 1971, as a Republican US Senator, Thurmond became the first southern Senator to hire a black in his senatorial office. [131]

In 1954, additional civil rights progress was made when the US Supreme Court rendered its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, [132] integrating public schools and ending segregation. (Significantly, the Court was only reversing its own position taken nearly sixty years earlier in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld segregation laws enacted by Democratic State legislatures.)

In 1957, and then again in 1960, Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower made bold civil rights proposals to increase black voting rights and protections. [133] Since Congress was solidly in the hands of the Democrats, they cut the heart out of his bills before passing weak, watered-down versions of his proposals. [134] Nevertheless, to focus national attention upon the plight of blacks, Eisenhower started a civil rights commission and was the first President to appoint a black to an executive position in the White House. [135]

In 1963, following the Birmingham riots, Democratic President John F. Kennedy proposed a strong civil rights bill. Its language was taken from the wording of Eisenhower's original civil rights bill (before it was gutted by Democrats) and from proposals made by Eisenhower's civil rights commission. [136] Kennedy's tragic assassination halted his bill.

In 1964, the 24th Amendment was added to the Constitution, abolishing the poll tax. Significantly, on five previous occasions the House passed a ban on the poll tax but Senate Democrats had killed the bills each time. [137] As early as 1949 (as part of Truman's proposed civil rights package), Democratic Sen. Spessard Holland (FL) introduced a constitutional amendment to end poll taxes, but it was 1962 before it was approved by the Senate. [138] Significantly, 91 percent of the Republicans in Congress voted to end the poll tax but only 71 percent of the Democrats did so; and in the Senate, of the 16 Senators who opposed the 24th Amendment, 15 were Democrats. [139] (The 24th Amendment banned poll taxes only for federal elections; in 1966, the US Supreme Court struck down poll taxes for all elections, including local and State. [140])

In 1964, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson picked up the civil rights bill introduced by President Kennedy. However, even though Democrats held almost two-thirds of the seats in Congress at that time, Johnson could not garner sufficient votes from within his own party to pass the bill. (Johnson needed 269 votes from his Party to achieve passage but could garner the support of only 198 of the 315

Democrats in Congress. [141]) Johnson therefore worked with Republicans to achieve the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, followed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. (The 1965 Voting Rights Act by Johnson was a resurrection of Eisenhower's original language before it had been killed by Democrats. When it was finally approved under Johnson, of the 18 Senators who opposed the Voting Rights Act, 17 were Democrats. In fact, 97 percent of Republican Senators voted for the Act. [142])

The 1965 Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests and authorized the federal government to oversee voter registration and elections in counties that had used voter eligibility tests. Within a year, 450,000 new southern blacks successfully registered to vote; [143] and voter registration of African-Americans in Mississippi rose from only 5 percent in 1960 to 60 percent by 1968. [144]

The 1965 Voting Rights Act opened opportunities for African-Americans that they had not enjoyed since Republicans had been in power a century before; the laws and policies long enforced by southern Democratic legislatures had finally come to an end. As a result, the number of blacks serving in federal and State legislatures rose from 2 in 1965 to 160 in 1990. [145]

Current Controversies-” and Successes

In recent years, much national media coverage has focused on allegations of election fraud in Dade County and West Palm Beach, Florida; St. Louis, Missouri; Michigan (the buying of votes); New Mexico (the destruction of thousands of uncounted ballots); etc. Significantly, each one of these incidents occurred in an area that was overwhelmingly Democratic and where the elections had been administered by Democratic election officials. The fact that such problems occur in areas under Democratic rather than Republican control might surprise many today, but it would not have surprised African-Americans a century ago.

In 1875, African-American US Rep. Joseph H. Rainey (Republican from SC) declared: “We intend to continue to vote so long as the government gives us the right and necessary protection; and I know that right accorded to us now will never be withheld in the future if left to the Republican Party.” [146] In fact, on the floor of Congress, Rainey told Democrats: “Your votes, your actions, and the constant cultivation of your cherished prejudices prove to the Negroes of the entire country that the Democrats are in opposition to them, and if they (the Democrats) could have [their way], our race would have no foothold here. . . . The Democratic Party may woo us, they may court us and try to get us to worship at their shrine, but I will tell the gentleman that we are Republicans by instinct, and we will be Republicans so long as God will allow our proper senses to hold sway over us.” [147]

The original philosophies and actions of both major parties are vividly documented in history but are largely unreported today. And while there has been good and bad on both sides, a general pattern is clearly established: African-Americans made their most significant gains as Republicans. Even today many of those patterns still remain. It is significant that black Republican US Rep. JC Watts (OK) chaired the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in 2000. Watts was the third African-American to chair a National Republican Convention (the first was US Rep. John Roy Lynch (MS) in 1884 and then US Sen. Edward Brooke (MA) in 1968); [148] however, no African-American has ever chaired, or even co-chaired, a Democratic National Convention. Similarly, in the 130 years that Democrats controlled Texas, only 4 minority individuals served Statewide; in the 8 years that Republicans have controlled the State, 6 minority individuals already have served Statewide. In fact, Texas just elected three African-Americans to statewide office-” all as Republicans, apparently becoming the first State in America's history to achieve this distinction. Furthermore, Maryland and Ohio each just elected black Lt. Governors-” both as Republicans.

An important point is illustrated by these recent elections (and by scores before them): in Democratic-controlled States, rarely are African-Americans elected statewide (with the exception of US Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun (IL, 1992-1998)); and African-American Democratic Representatives to Congress usually are elected only from minority districts (districts with a majority of minority voters). Minority Republicans, on the other hand, are elected statewide in Republican States, or in congressional districts with large white majorities. [149]

Perhaps this explains why African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass a century ago reminded blacks: "The Republican Party is the ship, all else is the sea." [150] The history of African-American voting rights in America proves Douglass was right.

[For more information on the struggle for African American Civil Rights see our *Setting the Record Straight* resource (in DVD, VHS, and Book format); we have also cataloged our Black History resources here]

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