



# 50 YEARS LATER

Commemorating  
the Voting Rights  
Act of 1965

# History of the Voting Rights Act

Although the 15th Amendment granted African Americans the right to vote, there were literacy tests, poll taxes and other discriminatory requirements put in place to make it difficult for eligible citizens to register to vote. The Amendment passed in 1870 but it did not fully take effect until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, after which most African Americans living in the South were able to register to vote and participate in the democratic process without facing disenfranchisement.

## Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is a milestone in national legislation that prohibits discriminatory voting practices from disenfranchising African Americans. The act, which was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, makes it illegal to require eligible voters to pass literacy tests in order to register to vote.

In the same year the act was passed, many key events took place throughout the Civil Rights Movement: Malcolm X was assassinated, the Selma to Montgomery marches occurred, the Watts riots in Los Angeles occurred, and President Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 to enforce Affirmative Action for the first time.

## Looking Forward

Since its initial passage, the act has expanded its reach with amendments that assist language minorities in the voting process by providing language-specific election materials to jurisdictions with large numbers of language minorities.



S. 1564

Eighty-ninth Congress of the United States of America

AT THE FIRST SESSION

Began and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the fourth day of January, one thousand nine hundred and sixty-five

An Act

To enforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That this Act shall be known as the "Voting Rights Act of 1965".

Sec. 1. No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.

Sec. 2. (a) Whenever the Attorney General institutes a proceeding under any statute to enforce the guarantees of the fifteenth amendment in any State or political subdivision the court shall authorize the appointment of Federal examiners by the United States Civil Service Commission in accordance with section 6 to serve for such period of time and for such political subdivisions as the court shall determine is appropriate to enforce the guarantees of the fifteenth amendment (1) as part of any injunctive order if the court determines that the appointment of such examiners is necessary to enforce such guarantees or (2) as part of any final judgment if the court finds that violations of the fifteenth amendment justifying equitable relief have occurred in such State or subdivision: Provided, That the court need not authorize the appointment of examiners if any incidents of denial or abridgment of the right to vote on account of race or color (1) have been few in number and have been promptly and effectively corrected by State or local action, (2) the continuing effect of such incidents has been eliminated, and (3) there is no reasonable probability of their recurrence in the future.

(b) If in a proceeding instituted by the Attorney General under any statute to enforce the guarantees of the fifteenth amendment in any State or political subdivision the court finds that a test or device has been used for the purpose or with the effect of denying or abridging the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color, it shall prevent the use of tests and devices in such State or political subdivision as the court shall determine is appropriate and for such period as it deems necessary.

(c) If in any proceeding instituted by the Attorney General under any statute to enforce the guarantees of the fifteenth amendment in any State or political subdivision the court finds that violations of the fifteenth amendment justifying equitable relief have occurred within the territory of such State or political subdivision, the court, in addition to such relief as it may grant, shall retain jurisdiction for such period as it may deem appropriate and during such period no voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure with respect to voting different from that in force on effect of the time the proceeding was commenced shall be enforced unless and until the court finds that such qualification, prerequisite, standard, practice, or procedure does not have the purpose and will not have the effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color: Provided, That such qualification, prerequisite, standard, practice, or procedure may be enforced if the qualification, prerequisite, standard, practice, or procedure has been submitted by the chief legal officer or other appropriate official of such State or subdivision to the Attorney General and the Attorney General has not interposed an objection within sixty days after such

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Sec. 17. Nothing in this Act shall be construed to deny, impair, or otherwise adversely affect the right to vote of any person registered to vote under the law of any State or political subdivision.

Sec. 18. There are hereby authorized to be appropriated such sums as are necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act.

Sec. 19. If any provision of this Act or the application thereof to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the remainder of the Act and the application of the provision to other persons not similarly situated or to other circumstances shall not be affected thereby.

John W. McCormack  
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Hubert H. Humphrey  
Vice President of the United States and  
President of the Senate

APPROVED

AUG - 6 1965

Lyndon B. Johnson





# Timeline of 1965

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*February 26, 1869*

On this day, the United States Congress passed the 15th Amendment declaring that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

*May 31, 1870*

To further protect the rights established in the 15th Amendment, President Ulysses S. Grant signed into law The Enforcement Act of 1870 promising federal prosecution of anyone who obstructed citizens in the exercise of those rights.

*1890s-1960s*

Despite these protections, the Jim Crow laws passed by several southern legislatures effectively suppressed the African American vote.

Poll taxes were established.

Literacy tests were administered.

In 1910 Louisiana, less than 1% of eligible African American voters were registered.

*March 7, 1965*

Civil rights demonstrators began their first march from Selma to Montgomery, incurring many losses, but giving courage to millions and inspiring real change.

*August 6, 1965*

President Lyndon Johnson signs into law the Voting Rights Act establishing landmark protective measures to prohibit discriminatory, voter-suppression tactics.



# Timeline of 1965

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**March 24, 1966**

In its decision on Harper vs. Virginia Board of Elections, the Supreme Court held that poll taxes were illegal for all elections.

**June 22, 1970**

President Nixon signs the extension of the Voting Rights Act, proclaiming the provisions of the Act "to be of great importance."

**November 7, 1972**

Barbara Jordan of Houston and Andrew Young of Atlanta become the first African Americans elected to Congress from the South since the reconstruction era.

**August 6, 1975**

President Gerald Ford reauthorizes the Voting Rights Act which included new provisions to extend assistance to language minorities.

**June 29, 1982**

Recognizing its importance, President Ronald Reagan signed a 25-year extension to the Voting Rights Act remarking as he signed "the right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties and we will not see its luster diminished."

**July 27, 2006**

George Bush signed the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, And Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act Of 2006 extending protections for another 25 years.

*"The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) was designed to restore the birthright of every American - the right to choose our leaders."*



# Literacy Test

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Although the 15th Amendment granted African Americans the right to vote, there were literacy tests, poll taxes and other discriminatory requirements put in place to make it difficult for eligible citizens to register to vote. This is an example of the literacy test given to prospective voters purportedly to test their literacy in order to vote. In practice, these tests were intended to disenfranchise African-Americans and other minorities.

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## Alabama's Voter Literacy Test (circa 1965)

In Part "A" you are given a section of the Alabama Constitution to read aloud. The sections are taken from a big loose-leaf binder. Some are easier than others. If white applicants are given the test at all, they generally get the easy ones. The Registrar makes sure that Black applicants get the hardest ones – the ones filled with legalese and long convoluted sentences. For example a white applicant might be given:

SECTION 20: That no person shall be imprisoned for debt.

While a Black applicant might be given:

SECTION 260: The income arising from the sixteenth section trust fund, the surplus revenue fund, until it is called for by the United States government, and the funds enumerated in sections 257 and 258 of this Constitution, together with a special annual tax of thirty cents on each one hundred dollars of taxable property in this state, which the legislature shall levy, shall be applied to the support and maintenance of the public schools, and it shall be the duty of the legislature to increase the public school fund from time to time as the necessity therefore and the condition of the treasury and the resources of the state may justify; provided, that nothing herein contained shall be so construed as to authorize the legislature to levy in any one year a greater rate of state taxation for all purposes, including schools, than sixty-five cents on each one hundred dollars' worth of taxable property; and provided further, that nothing herein contained shall prevent the legislature from first providing for the payment of the bonded indebtedness of the state and interest thereon out of all the revenue of the state.

The Registrar marked each word that in his or her opinion you mispronounced. In some counties, you had to orally interpret the section to the registrar's satisfaction. You then had to either copy out by hand a section of the Constitution, or write it down from dictation as the registrar spoke (mumbled) it. White applicants usually were allowed to copy, Black applicants usually had to take dictation. The Registrar then judged whether you were "literate" or "illiterate." His/her judgment was final and could not be appealed.

# Literacy Test

After that, you were given Parts "B" and "C" which were two sets of four written questions that you had to answer.

The following are examples of those questions.

Part B sample questions:

1. Has the following part of the U.S. Constitution been changed? "Representatives shall be apportioned among the several states according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each state, excluding Indians not taxed."
  - \_\_\_\_\_ passing legislation
  - \_\_\_\_\_ collection of income tax
  - \_\_\_\_\_ giving welfare checks
3. There are three main types of city government in Alabama, Name one.
4. Law requires that "In God we trust" be placed on all money issued in the United States.
5. What body can try impeachments of the president of the United States?
6. Check the applicable definition for responsibility?
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a duty
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a speech
  - \_\_\_\_\_ failure
7. Name the attorney general of the United States.
8. Women may now serve on juries in Alabama State courts?
9. Can the president of the United States be removed from office for conviction of bribery?
10. Check the applicable definition for "treaty"
  - \_\_\_\_\_ agreement between nations
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a tax
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a written oration
11. Name the man who is nationally known for heading the Federal Bureau of Investigation for many years.
12. What officer is designated by the Constitution to be president of the Senate of the United States?



# Literacy Test

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## Part "C" sample questions:

1. Does the population of the state affect the amount of individual or corporate income taxes which may be levied on its citizens?
2. Who pays members of Congress for their services, their home states or the United States?
3. How many senators are elected from each state?
4. If the United States is a party in a suit can the case be heard in a federal court?
5. If a person charged with treason denies his guilt, how many persons must testify against him before he can be convicted?
6. At what time of day on January 20 each four years does the term of the president of the United States end?
7. If the president does not wish to sign a bill, how many days is he allowed in which to return it to Congress for reconsideration?
8. If a bill is passed by Congress and the President refuses to sign it and does not send it back to Congress in session within the specified period of time, is the bill defeated or does it become law?
9. Can the state coin money with the consent of Congress?
10. Name one are of authority over state militia reserved exclusively to the states.
11. The power of granting patents, that is, of securing to inventors the exclusive right to their discoveries, is given to the Congress for the purpose of \_\_\_\_\_.
12. The only legal tender which may be authorized by states for payment of debts is \_\_\_\_\_.





## Proclamation Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

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**WHEREAS**, on August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law; this landmark piece of federal legislation prohibits racial discrimination in voting; Congress later amended the Act five times to expand its protections; and

**WHEREAS**, the ACT was designed to enforce the voting rights guaranteed by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution, the Act allowed for a mass enfranchisement of racial minorities throughout the country; and

**WHEREAS**, the Act contains numerous provisions that regulate the administration of elections and provide nationwide protections for voting rights; and

**WHEREAS**, the Act requires jurisdictions containing significant language-minority populations to provide bilingual ballots and other election materials; and

**WHEREAS**, the Act has been the single most effective tool in protecting the right to vote and assuring the integrity of the voting process in this century; and

**WHEREAS**, several Santa Cruz County residents risked their lives during the southern Civil Rights Movement to ensure the voting rights of African Americans and all citizens, we recognize and thank them for their efforts; these residents include: Bob Fitch, Maria Gitin, Paul and Pat Bokulich, Darrell and Karen Darling, Patricia Ann Phillips Archdeacon, and Richard Aryeh Nanas. In addition, we recognize Daniel Dodge Sr. for his contributions toward ensuring that provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act were applied to the City of Watsonville.

**NOW, THEREFORE BE IT PROCLAIMED**, that the members of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on August 6, 2015. We honor its significance, and

**BE IT FURTHER PROCLAIMED**, that the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors will continue to protect the rights of voters in Santa Cruz County; and

**BE IT FURTHER PROCLAIMED**, that we recognize the great contributions and achievements of our government leaders and civil rights activists for encouraging participation in the democratic process and protecting voter rights.



50  
YEARS  
LATER

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Commemorating the Voting Rights Act of 1965