

ELECTION CENTRAL



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The Civil Rights Movement and Passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Five years after the Civil War, the 15th Amendment was passed and removed the legal barriers that prevented Black Americans from voting. The federal law was a step towards the right direction. However at the state level, the states practiced voter discrimination (e.g. poll taxes, intimidation, literacy tests, grandfather clauses) that continued to stop Black Americans from participating in the elections enabled by Jim Crow laws.

The voter discrimination tactics led to the disenfranchisement of nearly all Black Americans, which eventually sparked the Civil Rights Movement, a movement characterized by protests, boycotts, and sit-ins against the unfair electoral system and racial segregation. As the movement grew, there was increased pressure on the government to uphold voting rights for Black Americans.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which included Martin Luther King Jr., launched a voting rights campaign in Alabama in the beginning of 1965.

Near Selma, Alabama in Marion, a demonstration gained national attention when Jimmie Lee Jackson, a deacon of the Baptist Church, was shot by a state trooper while protecting his mother from a nightstick of the trooper. Jackson died eight days later on February 26, 1965.

The murder of Jackson sparked another demonstration on March 7 led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis. This was the first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. Thousands of Americans, both Black and White, joined the march, which later became known as "Bloody Sunday," during

which the peaceful demonstration was attacked by counter protestors and state troopers with tear gas and clubs.

Bloody Sunday was televised and two days later, King led another march known as “Turnaround Tuesday” but was prevented from making the full march due to a court order. King and the marchers held a prayer on the Edmund Pettus Bridge before marching back to Selma.

President Lyndon B. Johnson made it clear that he supported the movement and urged protection for the marchers. The last march on March 21, received federal protection from FBI agents and Alabama National Guardsmen. Five days and 54 miles, the marchers trekked their way to Montgomery.

At the steps of the capitol building in Montgomery, King addressed to the crowd of 25,000 people “We’re on the move now and no waves of racism can stop us.”

President Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965 days before the last march. The federal legislation was signed on August 6, which is now known as one of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation in U.S. history.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits racial discrimination in voting of any kind. The same day Johnson signed the legislation, he ordered attorney general Nicholas Katzenbach to sue any state that continues to utilize poll taxes.

There have been five amendments to the Voting Rights Act since 1965, expanding and redefining voter equality.

Voter Highlight



At 92 years old, **Delores Murray** has never missed a single election since the day she was able to vote. Lived through segregation and witnessed the Civil Rights Movements, Murray tells her voting story as a Black American.

Growing up in Richmond, Murray saw a city that was formerly the capital of the Confederates turned into a vibrant hub for Black Americans. With a large population of Black Americans, only so few were able to vote as the city imposed poll taxes.

“We made just barely enough money to keep a roof over our heads, food on our table, clothes on our kids,” Murray said. “Very few people were able to pay for the taxes.”

Murray currently serves as the chaplain for Richmond Crusade for Voters (RCV), an organization that was formed in 1956 to mobilize the Black voters in the city.

William S. Thornton, founder of RCV, emphasized that while there were poll taxes, voting was very important. RCV encouraged people to pay their poll taxes and held funding campaigns to help Black voters pay the fee.

“Once poll taxes were removed, more Black people were voting,” Murray said.

Murray casted her first vote after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that poll taxes were unconstitutional in the Harper vs. Virginia State Board of Elections case.

“Voting is very important for everyone who is eligible to vote,” Murray said. “The reason being is because it says you have a voice. You have a voice in who you want to represent you.”

Murray said she is excited to cast her ballot in the upcoming presidential election.