

A Short History of Voting Rights in Mississippi

Mississippi Statehood in 1817 to End of the Civil War

When Mississippi entered the union in 1817 as our nation's twentieth state, it drew up a constitution that was the least democratic of any state admitted after the War of 1812. **Suffrage** was restricted to white male taxpaying property holders over the age of 21 who had lived in the state for at least one year. These restrictions remained in place until the constitutional convention of 1832, when the opening of Choctaw homelands to white settlers and corresponding influx of white immigrants from the East Coast prompted officials to extend the right of suffrage to all white men over the age of 21. (Property qualifications for voting and office holding were abolished.) This move by elite political leaders including John A. Quitman was an attempt to stave off revolution at the hands of arriving white frontiersmen who would surely demand the vote. Suffrage would not be broadened again until after the Civil War, when mandated by the federal government.

Reconstruction: 1865-1876

Required to rewrite their constitution immediately after the Civil War, white Mississippians refrained from conferring full political equality on its black residents. Formerly enslaved people, though technically free, did not enjoy the full privileges of citizenship, much less the right to vote. In late 1865, Mississippi adopted a series of laws, known as the “**Black Code,**” that granted certain rights to the newly freed, but limited others. They could own personal property, be legally married, and testify, sue and be sued in state courts. But the code also provided for “binding out” young black children as apprentices (with former owners given first option to engage them), and black adults were required to have a home or a job by January 1, 1866 or be fined as vagrants and ultimately “hired out” (with former owners again given first option). Licenses were required to do certain jobs, and blacks could not rent agricultural land, own a gun, or vote. Overall, the Black Code restricted the mobility, economic opportunity, and political voice of the formerly enslaved.

In reaction, the U.S. Congress invalidated the 1865 constitution and required the adoption of universal manhood suffrage. In March 1867, Congress passed a series of Reconstruction Acts

that nullified the southern state governments that had been reorganized under Presidential Reconstruction (1865-1867) and replaced them with five military districts, all under martial law. (Mississippi and Arkansas made up the Fourth Military District.) Under the Reconstruction Acts, all adult males (white or black) who had lived in the state at least one year and were willing to take the so-called “iron-clad loyalty oath” were eligible to vote. As a result, when Mississippi held its 1867 election of delegates to the constitutional convention of 1868, it was the first biracial election in Mississippi history. In fact, more blacks than whites registered to vote! Many of the African American voters backed liberal Republican candidates for delegate to the convention. With 17 blacks among the 94 delegates, the convention of 1868 was dubbed the “**Black and Tan Convention**,” a term later used to denigrate the constitution they wrote. The 1868 Mississippi Constitution extended to African Americans the full rights of citizenship: the right to a jury trial and freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petition; the right to own property, the right to testify in court, and the right to vote (without property stipulations). This period (1867-1876) of Congressional or **Radical Reconstruction** was a success in terms of blacks’ participation in democracy, both as voters and officeholders. At least 226 black Mississippians held public office during Reconstruction and it was then that Mississippi sent two black senators (Hiram R. Revels of Natchez, and Blanche K. Bruce, of Floreyville, in Bolivar County) to Congress. Black men began to vote in Mississippi, but not without experiencing violence at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan and Democratic Party operatives. This violence, coupled with the waning interest of the federal government, contributed to the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi in 1876.

1875 to Century’s End

Between 1875 and 1890, the state of Mississippi did its best to eliminate the civil rights advancements achieved during Reconstruction. Violence against blacks and Republicans continued to accompany elections. White supremacists in Vicksburg, for example, formed the White Man’s party, patrolled the streets with guns and intimidated black voters into staying home on election day. The scare tactic worked: Democrats committed to white supremacy replaced every Republican incumbent in the 1875 elections. Claiming concern over this type of violence, delegates called a constitutional convention in 1890 – then used the opportunity to craft ways of evading the **14th and 15th amendments** of the Constitution. Clauses that required registrants to pay a **poll tax** and pass a **literacy test** were ultimately affirmed. (Members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union had advocated woman suffrage as a means of outnumbering African Americans at the polls, but enfranchised white Mississippians (all men)

were even less prepared to accept female voters.) To appease disgruntled poor whites, a 1902 law established the system of **white-only primary** elections that would solidify the **color line** and empower racist demagoguery for decades.

1900 to World War II

At the turn of the century, the vast majority of black Mississippians lived circumscribed lives: denied economic opportunity, threatened against voting, and restricted from inhabiting and frequenting spaces reserved for whites. Nevertheless, African Americans in the **segregated** or **Jim Crow** South often flourished within parallel, all-black worlds of support and respect--or fled the state as part of the **Great Migration** to the north. Until 1944, Mississippi held its November general elections after a Democratic **white primary** in which only white people were allowed to vote. Because only one party -- the Democratic Party -- was a strong political entity, this meant that whoever won the primary automatically won the general election. It also effectively voided the political power of the state's few registered black voters, since they were prevented from participating in the primary where the real decisions were made. It was not until after World War II that demands for black voting rights would build sufficient momentum to effect change.

Post-WWII to 1960

Returning black WWII veterans were especially piqued to find southern race relations unchanged, and many were determined to obtain the same liberty they had fought for overseas on others' behalf. Brothers **Medgar and Charles Evers**, of Decatur, Mississippi were among those veterans who attempted to vote in 1946; only a fraction of the approximately 5,000 registered blacks succeeded in voting that year. As national sentiment for civil rights reform increased in the 1940s and 1950s, segregation hardened into **massive resistance** against social equality, as racists resisted losing their privilege and social control. Civil rights reform in education, public accommodations, economic opportunity, and politics finally took place after African Americans and their white allies organized and conducted a protracted grassroots struggle for freedom. Voting rights was a central goal of the modern Civil Rights Movement. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision in ***Brown v. Board of Education*** declared school segregation unconstitutional, and a series of **freedom rides** and **sit-ins** in 1960-61 opened up public accommodations, many civil rights workers turned their attention to the issue of obtaining full voting rights. A black voter registration campaign spearheaded by Bob Moses in McComb in 1961 served as a pilot project for the larger Freedom Summer project of 1964 that brought hundreds of college students to the state to canvass potential voters and operate Freedom Schools.