

Mississippi voters see signs of change

Black communities reengage in state with history of suppression

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

JACKSON, Miss. — A few years ago, Tiffany Wilburn just didn't see the point in voting any longer.

Her children didn't have proper school books, health insurance was expensive and hard to get, police abuse continued against Black residents, and her city's struggle to get clean drinking water seemed emblematic of her community always coming out on the short end of state decision-making.

Combine that with Mississippi's long history of voter suppression and she felt casting a ballot was simply a hopeless exercise.

"It's like you're not being heard," Wilburn said in her hometown of Jackson, the state capital. "You run to the polls, hoping and praying for change, and then you look around and nothing's really happening. So you shut down."

Recent interviews with Black voters, voting rights groups, candidates and researchers show that the voter fatigue felt by Wilburn has been widely shared in a state where nearly 40% of the overall population is Black.

This year, political dynamics have combined to begin changing that, leading many voters such as Wilburn to re-engage.

The race for governor appears competitive and is drawing national attention. Tuesday's election also happens to be the first one in Mississippi to be held without the burden of an unusual post-Reconstruction constitutional provision that had made it virtually impossible for Black candidates to win on a statewide basis.

Five Black candidates are running for statewide office, from agriculture commissioner to secretary of state. Each is trying to become the first Black candidate to ever win one of those posts.

Voting rights advocates hope the changes will encourage a rebuilding of the Black community's voting base and provide a tail wind to Democrats in a state that is now mostly controlled by Republicans.

"Black people here aren't scared to vote and do care because it impacts all of us, our entire livelihood," said Glenn Warren, a 66-year-old voter in Vicksburg. "Now it's more important that we enhance and educate all voters, especially Black people. But the voting process isn't necessarily sound and there are many constraints that we're facing like gerrymandering, purging of voter rolls — it's a lot. But I'm going and taking everyone I can with me."

White leaders of both parties used numerous tactics over several decades to suppress the Black vote, from poll taxes to literacy tests. Among the most pernicious was a provision slipped into the Mississippi Constitution in 1890 that required candidates for governor and other statewide offices to win not only a majority of the vote, but also a majority of the state's 122 House districts.

After a lawsuit, voters in 2020 repealed it, ensuring that candidates just had to win a simple statewide majority. Some voting rights groups and candidates said that provides an opening, not just for this year's candidates, but also to start expanding their voter base.

Robert Bradford, the Democratic nominee for state agriculture commissioner, said repealing that part of the constitution will open doors for Black candidates to succeed in the years to come. He joined with several other Democratic candidates to engage with voters who had become disenchanted, thinking their voice would never make a



"You run to the polls, hoping and praying for change, and then you look around and nothing's really happening. So you shut down," said Tiffany Wilburn, a social activist based in Jackson, Miss. PHOTOS BY ROGELO V. SOULIS/AP



Monitors review a card with a submitted question from an attendee during a candidates' forum Oct. 26 in Vicksburg, Miss.



Danyelle Holmes, a social justice organizer for a group that advocates for voting rights, democracy and a range of social issues, says there is work to do in addressing a part of the state constitution that strips voting rights from those who have committed certain felonies.

difference in the state.

"We've got to sow those seeds in areas that never had anything grown," he said. "We met people who felt like, 'Why vote because nothing's going to happen?' It's that mindset and those feelings that we have to address."

Black voters in the state still face a disproportionate burden. A common complaint is about a purging of voter rolls that has caused problems for Black voters as recently as this year's August primary.

Taylor Turnage of the Mississippi Votes Action Fund had to file a provisional ballot after she went to her polling place and found her name had been removed from the rolls.

"I've been voting in Tougaloo for several years with no problems. But when I went, I was told, 'You're not in the system,'" she said. "You're purging people who are actually voting now? If people don't know they're purged until Election Day, it's too late then."

Among the remaining hurdles is another part of the state constitution that strips voting rights from people who have committed certain felonies, a provision that also dates to 1890.

Critics say the named crimes were ones the white power structure thought Black people were more likely to commit. In 2009, a former Democratic state attorney general issued an opinion that expanded the list to 22 crimes, including timber larceny, carjacking, felony shoplifting and passing bad checks.

"We have to have conversations about what's still on the books — because that repeal is done, but the work

isn't over," said Danyelle Holmes, a national social justice organizer for Repairers of the Breach, a group that advocates for voting rights, democracy and a range of social issues. "That's how we get to the root of the fatigue."

The U.S. Supreme Court declined to reconsider a 2022 decision by the conservative 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that said Mississippi had remedied the discriminatory intent of the original provisions by altering the list of disenfranchising crimes.

Many other states in recent years have taken steps to reinstate voting rights for former felons. In Mississippi, more than 10% of Black adults are formerly incarcerated, according to a 2022 report by The Sentencing Project.

"That's a huge percentage. If the elections were close and that 10% could vote, it very well could sway the elections," said Marvin King, a professor at the University of Mississippi who focuses on African American politics.

More recent events have contributed to a sense of embattlement in the Black community.

In particular, a 2022 water crisis in Jackson left most of the 150,000 residents in the majority Black city without running water for several days after heavy rains damaged one of the water-treatment plants. Residents lamented the government's lack of attention to their basic needs.

Last spring, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves, who faces a reelection challenge from Democrat Brandon Presley, signed into law a major change passed by the Republican-controlled and majority

white Legislature that created special courts with appointed judges in the county that includes Jackson.

Two lawsuits challenged it, arguing that the Mississippi Constitution requires most judges to be elected. Critics also said it was another way to make it harder for Black voters to elect candidates of their choice. In September, the Mississippi Supreme Court blocked the appointment of the circuit court judges but allowed a new lower-level court with one appointed judge.

Ty Pinkins, the Democratic nominee for secretary of state, took notice, citing his extensive history in suing the state for similar offenses in the past.

"We're here to make sure that doesn't continue to happen," he said during a candidates' rally in Vicksburg.

Black voters are listening, but some said boosting engagement is a two-way street: If they show up to vote, it has to be translated into action. That sentiment is especially strong on college campuses, a focal point of several of the Black candidates running for statewide office.

Students at Jackson State University, a historically Black college, want to see candidates spend time on campus discussing the priorities of the youngest voting generation.

"If I were to put myself in a candidate's shoes, I would actually go on campus not to get votes but to understand," said Austin Crudup, a 23-year-old student. "Ask what is something that you would like me to fix or change? What could I do to make your life a little bit easier?"

Reynolds

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event in March. But Trump has accused her of disloyalty for weighing an endorsement before the caucuses and tried to take credit for her winning the governorship.

His campaign quickly criticized her on Sunday.

"Kim Reynolds apparently has begun her retirement tour early as she clearly does not have any ambition for higher office," the Trump campaign said in an emailed statement. "Earlier this year, she promised her constituents that she would remain neutral in the race, yet she has completely gone back on that promise. Regardless, her endorsement will not make any difference in this

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Trump also weighed in in a series of angry social media posts, accusing her of disloyalty and renegeing on her pledge to remain neutral.

"If and when Kim Reynolds of Iowa endorses Ron DeSantis, who is absolutely dying in the polls both in Iowa and Nationwide, it will be the end of her political career in that MAGA

would never support her again, just as MAGA will never support DeSantis again," he wrote. "Two extremely disloyal people getting together is, however, a very beautiful thing to watch. They can now remain loyal to each other because nobody else wants them!!!"

Trump is the heavy favorite to win in Iowa. DeSantis is competing with former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley to

emerge in the leadoff contest, just 10 weeks away, as a viable alternative to Trump.

A month ago, DeSantis sent about 20 of his Tallahassee-based campaign headquarters staff to Iowa. The super political action committee supporting him, Never Back Down, has had roughly two dozen staff reaching out to would-be caucus participants since the summer.

On Friday, DeSantis spoke to about 50 GOP activists at an early-afternoon stop in Denison, the heart of Republican-heavy Crawford County. It was the 86th Iowa county he's visited, on a mission to visit each of its 99, and the last puzzle piece in the bloc of conservative western Iowa.

Reynolds is popular within the party in part for signing a school choice bill and strict abortion ban this year.