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What America Looked Like Before the Voting Rights Act of 1965

When Voting Meant Risking Your Job, Your Home, or Your Life



William Spivey Follow 13 min read · 2 days ago

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In the years leading up to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), what the public knew depended greatly on where one lived. Most Americans got their news from local and regional newspapers. By 1965, television ownership was exploding, with 93% of U.S. households owning a set. There were only three major networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC. Walter Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley were the steady, reliable figures, while Peter Jennings reached a younger audience. Jennings had joined ABC the previous year, in August 1964, primarily to cover the civil-rights movement.



ABC News, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Radio was still powerful, especially in rural areas, but it was hyper-local, as were most newspapers. Southern media echoed segregationist talking points. When it came to the violence leading up to the passage of the VRA, if the events were covered at all outside of brief segments on the national TV news, it was likely buried on inside pages of newspapers and condemned activists as agitators while praising police as peacekeepers.

The period just over two years before the VRA passage saw Medgar Evers assassinated in his driveway, four Black girls killed in a bombing at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, the murders of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, the Mississippi Freedom Summer Terror

Campaign, the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson followed by Bloody Sunday and the killings of white protesters Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo two weeks apart. Normally, this kind of news would hardly be noticed except that Bloody Sunday was shown on national television and the deaths of two white people in the following days shook Lyndon Johnson out of inaction and forced him into active support of the VRA he and Congress had been stalling on.



Richard apple, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Black people received news through Black newspapers and Black radio and especially in the South, were better informed than the white population. Black Americans were better informed because they had to be. Their survival depended on it. White Americans were less informed because their

media ecosystem was designed to keep them comfortable. White audiences were systematically shielded from the brutality happening around them. Black newspapers circulated widely in the South through Pullman porters, church subscriptions, community sharing, and barbershops. Every Black barbershop I went to as a youth had copies of Ebony and Jet magazines and the local Black newspaper, in my case, the Minneapolis Spokesman.

DEMOCRACY

DOUBLE VICTORY

AT HOME – ABROAD

"Negro Devised Blood Bank"--Newbold Morris

10 SOLDIERS KILLED, REPORT CHARGES

Claim Sawed-Off Shotguns Used In Alexandria Riot

NEW ORLEANS, La., Feb. 5—Employing the same ruthless tactics as blood-thirsty Nazi hordes, Louisiana State Troopers, National Guardsmen, civilian police and white MP's are accused, in a report of the New Orleans Press club, with the alleged killing of ten Negro soldiers, the wounding of an indeterminate number of others, and damage to dozens of businesses on Lee street, Alexandria, La., during the January 10th riots. This inside story on what actually happened claims there were many hours of wide-open shooting with innocent bystanders being exposed as well as Negro soldiers. The report charges the War Department with attempting to withhold the facts from the public and maintaining strict secrecy on the entire situation, refusing to let any newsmen in the area.

Breaking through the news barricade set up by Army officials, the Press Club representatives gathered their story from eye-witnesses, who have sworn to statements, now in the Press Club files, and are willing to testify before Congressional and War Department hearings which have been demanded. Others, directly connected with Army camps here, have also agreed to testify and have given the Press Club proof of the malicious attack resulting in the alleged death of ten soldiers.

LEAVE VICTIMS IN STREET

In this first public revelation of

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VOL. XXXIII—No. 6 PITTSBURGH, PA., SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1942 PRICE TEN CENTS

Race Doctors In U. S. Army Blocked By Surgeon General

MAGEE RESTRICTS MEDICAL OFFICERS CALLED TO COLORS

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5—(ANP)—It has become apparent to onlookers in Washington, that at least some of the difficulties which have been experienced by Negro professionals in the medical branches of the armed forces have their origin in the office of one man. He is Major General James C. Magee, surgeon-general of the United States Army.

Whether it is in the blocking of Negro physicians from general hospital work, whether it is the limiting of the number of Negro nurses who are permitted to the service, whether it is insistence that the Red Cross separate the blood of black donors from white and publicly state that such a procedure is being carried out, Major General Magee is said to be the individual who stands in the way of integral development and, in the case of the recent Red Cross ruling, discrimination and freedom from insult to the race.

Negro physicians have been strictly limited as to numbers and duties in the armed forces. Al-

(Continued on Page 4 Column 1)

READ . . . THE HORIZON — PAGE 13 —

"CHANGE IN PLANS" CAUSES DISMISSAL

NEW YORK, Feb. 5—Rosed R. Nesbitt from Chicago, hired as a $2,900-a-year War Department inspector recently and assigned to the Sperry Gyroscope Company in Brooklyn, was fired a few days after he reported for work by Captain Keehe in Washington, D. C. The only reason given was "a change in plans and use of new materials."

Mayor Fights Union Ban On Car Motorman

SAN FRANCISCO, Cal., Feb. 5—A showdown nears in the fight between Mayor Angelo J. Rossi and the Municipal Railway Carmen's Union over the placing of Audley L. Cole on a job as a motorman. On the issue hinges the success or failure of a fight to end jim crowism in city departments.

Cole, qualified by civil service, was appointed to the municipal street car position. Immediately the union ordered its members not to give Cole instructions on operating the street cars. Mayor Rossi ordered a four-day suspension of all employes refusing to teach Cole.

The union retaliated with a fine of $100 against any member who instructed the colored worker. The fight is being watched by all since the city departments maintain Jim Crow regulations of their own to keep out colored employes.

AFL Council Makes Plea

MOBILE, Ala., Feb. 5—The local Central Trades Council of the AFL, took a forthright position on the Negro in a resolution adopted at its meeting last week and forwarded a copy to M. P. Webster, international vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and member of the President's Fair Employment Committee.

In taking one of the most liberal stands of any labor union, the Council gave its full support to a training program for Negro workers and offered the help of its personnel as instructors. The Council also bitterly assailed wage differential among workers doing the same type of work and promised to use every method within its means "to eliminate any discrimination which may exist toward any race, creed, color or person."

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 5)

PROTEST SIKESTON LYNCHING TO GOV. DONNELL



Last Thursday a large delegation of St. Louis citizens, along with groups from many other sections of the State, took resolutions and petitions too Governor Donnell in Jefferson City protesting the brutal lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston and demanding immediate arrests and action. On receiving the delegation the Governor made one of the strongest condemnations of lynching ever uttered by a State Executive.

Some of the leaders of the group (kneeling) are: Harold W. Ross, president of the St. Louis branch National Negro Business League; Judge Frank S. Riddick; Atty. Sidney R. Redmond, president of the St. Louis branch, NAACP; J. Clinton, N. A. Sweet, publisher of the "American" and chairman of the delegation and Atty. R. L. Witherspoon.

Among those standing were: U. S. Fells, regional vice-president of the NNLB; Columbus Perry, Zaid Lenoir, Atty. Henry D. Espy, Camille Jordan, W. Chambers, J. E. Mitchell, editor of the "Argus"; Rice Wyatt, A. J. Bolton, George W. Carper, A. J. Ford, Dr. J. M. Friary, Elmer V. Mosley, Mrs. Gerty Goins, Mr. and Mrs. Wall and A. J. Tolliver.—(Mitchell photo)

Recall Of Our Diplomats Raises Question Of Status

By E. W. BAKER

WASHINGTON, D. C., Feb. 5—With the appearance on Washington streets last week of Clifton R. Wharton, Consul to Las Palmas, Canary Islands, his wife and children, at a time when the recall of Lester A. Walton, Minister to Liberia, was being discussed, the question is raised whether or not the government is recalling its few Negro Consuls from strategic geographical points during this world crisis.

Just as the War Department has its military secrets, the State Department has its diplomatic secrets and as a result an explanation why these two colored diplomats have been summoned to Washington is an enigma at present.

2 OTHERS IN MAJOR POSTS

Their recall here leaves only two colored persons holding consular posts at present—James G. Carter, consular general serving at Tananarive, Madagascar, French Africa, and William G. George, of this city, vice-consul at Monrovia, Liberia, who recently returned to his post after a "vacation" here.

Also in the diplomatic corps are three clerks: Miss Lillie May Hubbard of Mississippi, appointed in Oporto, Spain, and Las Palmas, Canary Islands, since she began service in 1922. Rupert Lloyd, of Maryland, clerk in the Legation, Monrovia, Liberia, appointed in 1941, Alphonse McAbee, of Mississippi, clerk in Monrovia, appointed

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 5)

PRESIDENT OF NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL BLASTS RACE BIAS

Tells Hampton Audience That U.S. May Be Faced With Long War Unless Negroes Are Included in Every Phase of Defense Program.

Race Justified In Criticizing

HAMPTON, Va., Feb. 5—Blasting the "segregation idea" of the American Red Cross in accepting Negro blood donors, Newbold Morris, $14,500-a-year president of the New York City council, revealed to a packed audience Sunday that a Negro had devised the blood bank.

The eminent liberal, a trustee of Hampton university, attacked at the racial discrimination idea in a Founders' Day address here. Said he:

"The American people are entitled to an explanation of the buck-passing going on between the American Red Cross and the Army and Navy. This is racial prejudice carried to an absurdity!

"Why," he continued, "it was Dr. Charles Drew, a Negro physician of the faculty of Howard university, who devised the blood bank

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 5)

Proposes $5,000 Reward to Apprehend Lynchers

WASHINGTON, D. C., Feb. 5—A reward of $5,000 for information leading to the speedy punishment of those responsible for the gruesome lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, Missouri, on January 25, was proposed by the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, towards which the Federation itself pledged $500.

"THE QUEEN COMES EAST"



Miss Lorraine Blandin, pretty daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Blandin of Berkeley, Calif., who leaves for a visit with her maternal grandmother, Mrs. James Brown of 1922 East Kansas street, Springfield, Ill. Lorraine plans to stay until Christmas of this year and finish her high school training there.—Joseph Photo.

'Negro Troops With MacArthur'

Radio Commentator Pays Tribute to Bravery of Mixed Fighting Forces in The Philippines.

By GABRIEL HEATTER
(Radio News Commentator)

"With General MacArthur there are many American Negroes. There are many Filipinos. This army will go down in history as more than a great army. It will long be remembered as a truly democratic army in which white men, Negroes, Filipinos, and others fought for each other.

"They are dying for the great ideal we are trying to keep alive. It is a history-making epoch in which white men and Negroes are fighting as one; fighting for the dignity and decency of man.

"We are Aryans, we are the super-men,' says Hitler. 'All others are to be slaves.' 'We Japs are the super-men,' they say. 'Democracy has had its day.'

"Theodore Roosevelt once declared we Americans are children of the crucible, we are final evidence of man's ability to rise above discrimination of color or creed—all free men.

"Down there on Bataan, men are proving it a thousand times every day. Up and down America millions are proving it every day. People of every race, color, and creed, not only the millions whose forebears came from Italy and Germany—all prepared to live and fight, if need be, to keep our freedom alive.

"Not by the sound of a man's name shall he judged his patriotism, nor the color of his skin, nor place of his birth, nor his place of worship. He shall be judged only by the flaming zeal which burns in his heart for everything to fight for and die for if need be."

Roberts' Report A Misprint

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5—Reputed existence of two "mystery divisions" in the United States Army apparently caused some daily newspapers, in reproducing the Roberts' report on the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, to "correct" the report and to insert the word "regiment" where division had been used.

There was no available evidence of the existence of either a 24th or a 25th Infantry division, stated in the Roberts' report to have been in Hawaii at the time of the attack.

But, of course, there are the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments. Thus it is believed that the Roberts' report was "corrected" to specify units which were known to exist rather than to permit specification of units which were not known to exist.

It has since been learned that the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments were not in Hawaii at the time of the Japanese attack.

BLOOD PLAN CALLED INSULT TO NEGROES

NEW YORK, Feb. 5—Segregation of blood offered by colored people to the American Red Cross Blood Donor Service is as much an insult to self-respecting Negroes as the Red Cross refusal to accept the blood, Walter White, secretary of the NAACP, told Norman H. Davis, Red Cross president, last week.

THEY HAD WHITE FACES!

Daily Newspaper Reporters, Dressed as Nazi Submarine Commanders, Go Unheeded Through the Streets of Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA, Feb. 5—Two enterprising newspaper reporters of the Philadelphia Nazi U-boat commanders and parts of this "Cradle of Liberty." They went everywhere, unmolested by the busy white citizens, the policemen or the army. These reporters summed up the situation thus: "We wonder if the Greeks bothered about sending a wooden horse into Troy. No Philadelphia horse is necessary. A Nazi can just walk into the city—in uniform."

On hearing of the story, a resourceful colored reporter, recalling the better fight on whether colored soldiers, guarding the City of Brotherly Love, should be discriminated in the use of USO recreation center, and the more recent attempt to take the Richard Allen Homes from colored citizens, wrote:

"The white folks are so busy keeping their feet on the Negro's neck they don't have time to look for their real enemy, the white face."

The Record reporters were dressed in full Nazi regalia and spoke with a pronounced German accent but they passed thousands of white people, sat in crowded restaurants, spoke to sailors, soldiers, policemen and walked the busy waterfront with its vital and costly defense shipping. No one said nary a word but offered them all the pleasant consideration one expects from a friendly visitor.



ARMY TO INDUCT 175,000 NEGROES

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5—(ANP)—In the new army planned by the War Department, there will be units totaling 175,000 Negroes, Secretary of War Stimson revealed at a press conference Thursday morning. The 175,000 will be in addition to the 118,000 already in service.

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 1)

The World TODAY

GEORGE S. SCHUYLER

The Windy City is excited over Dickerson's fight for the Chicago Congressional seat which has virtually been unoccupied for several years. He looms above his present incumbent like Goliath Head over Walkiki Beach. No Uncle Tom, he is said to be a brilliant, fighting progressive, adding needed color to that far-from-brilliant body. Not since the days of the militant DePriest has Negro Chicago been adequately represented in Congress.

CHICAGO'S POLICY BARONS are on the run. The grand jury has indicted 58 Negroes and three whites in a drive to smash the lucrative yearly racket. Some Negroes have made fortunes from pennies of the impoverished masses, and a few of them have invested their ill-gotten gains in stores and real estate, thereby increasing Negro business. Others have contributed vastly to vice and crime. Now they uneasily contemplate a day of reckoning when they will be forced to earn their livelihood by honest industry and conviction.

Chicago's big bosses took over the policy barons took over the weekly for "protection" and have been indicted. The white and powerful and colorful affiliations of honor [illegible] realistic and ethical [illegible] lies with tongues in cheek. Which reminds me of Rabelais' sage comment: Your law is like a spider's web—the big bugs break through and the little bugs get caught."

SEGREGATION has now been applied to blood banks. White blood will be accepted by the Red Cross, the Army's surgeon general, Magee insists that it be segregate and given only to Negroes asking for it. The Navy, although less liberal on many things, will not insist on blood segregation, it says, although it segregates Negroes themselves in the service. The Red Cross, however, is seeking funds from [illegible]

This blood business would have delighted those old wits and satirists—Martail, Rabelais, Voltaire, Dean Swift and Anatole France, because it is actually no such thing as Negro or white blood. All blood donors are alike and the four types of blood known to science are found equally in ALL populations regardless of the pigmentation of donors. But this racial propagandists are conditioned us to believe in "black" blood, "white" blood, "racial" blood, etc., for practical purposes a fiction has become a fact. We are still shackled by our [illegible]

[illegible] AMERICAN Negro [illegible] himself be in Uncle Sam's army in black soldiers in the Philippines, and [illegible] to other troops [illegible] in Asia and Africa, the world's conflict with [illegible] Already black boys [illegible] to Japanese air [illegible] others are [illegible] the circumstances, pretend to be indifferent war will soon change [illegible] There can be [illegible] him be dead [illegible] on foreign strands.

Negroes are being organized into full divisions [illegible] of all arms. Negro units are increasing in number. The number [illegible] being commissioned. There will be [illegible] more Negro Army [illegible] Black boys from Buffalo, Birmingham, and Boga[illegible] soon be rushing into [illegible] tanks, airplanes and [illegible] armed with the finest [illegible]

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 3)

Various, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

It's important to understand the state of Black voting in America and the pervasiveness of Jim Crow. In Dallas County, Alabama, where Bloody Sunday took place, about 2% of eligible Black adults were registered to vote in early 1965. Of 15,000+ Black adults of voting age, fewer than 300 were registered to vote. This was not an accident. It was the result of a deliberately engineered system.

1. Literacy tests were designed to fail Black applicants.

Examples included:

- Interpreting obscure constitutional clauses to the registrar's satisfaction.
- Copying long passages perfectly
- Answering trick questions with no correct answer

White applicants were often exempted or coached.

2. White-Only Registrars Refused to Process Applications

Dallas County's Board of Registrars:

- Opened the office only a few days per month
- Took long lunch breaks
- Closed early
- "Lost" applications
- Rejected applicants without explanation

3. Economic Retaliation

Black residents who attempted to register faced:

- Job loss
- Eviction from white-owned farms
- Denial of credit
- Being cut off from local stores
- Firing of family members

Sheriff Jim Clark and local white elites coordinated these reprisals.

4. Police Violence and Arrests

Attempting to register meant risking:

- Beatings
- Arrests on fabricated charges
- Public humiliation
- Surveillance

Sheriff Clark's deputies routinely assaulted people waiting in line at the courthouse.

5. Klan and White Citizens' Council Terror

These groups:

- Followed the Black residents' home
- Burned crosses

- Threatened families
- Targeted teachers, ministers, and business owners

The goal was to make registration feel like a death sentence.

6. Purges and "Good Character" Requirements

Registrars could reject applicants for:

- "Bad character"
- "Improper demeanor"
- "Insufficient understanding"

These subjective standards were used exclusively against Black applicants.

7. No Federal Protection

Before the Voting Rights Act:

- The Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964 were too weak
- Federal lawsuits took years
- Local judges were segregationists
- The DOJ had almost no enforcement power

This meant local officials operated with impunity.

Black people in Dallas County were not unregistered because they were uninformed or uninterested. They were unregistered because the county,

the state, the courts, the police, and white supremacist organizations worked together to make registration impossible and dangerous. Bloody Sunday happened because the system was functioning exactly as designed. Here's what Black voter registration looked like in ten major cities in the South before passage of the VRA:

1. Selma, Alabama (Dallas County)

2% One of the lowest in the nation, the epicenter of the Selma campaign.

2. Montgomery, Alabama (Montgomery County)

14% Still deeply suppressed despite being the state capital.

3. Birmingham, Alabama (Jefferson County)

19% Higher than rural counties, but still far below white registration.

4. Jackson, Mississippi (Hinds County)

5–6% Mississippi had the lowest statewide Black registration in the country.

5. Greenwood, Mississippi (Leflore County)

2% A SNCC stronghold because the numbers were so catastrophically low.

6. New Orleans, Louisiana (Orleans Parish)

31% One of the highest in the Deep South — still far below white rates.

7. Baton Rouge, Louisiana (East Baton Rouge Parish)

13% A mix of urban and rural suppression tactics.

8. Atlanta, Georgia (Fulton County)

52% A rare exception — Atlanta had comparatively high Black registration due to a stronger Black middle class and less violent suppression than Alabama or Mississippi.

9. Savannah, Georgia (Chatham County)

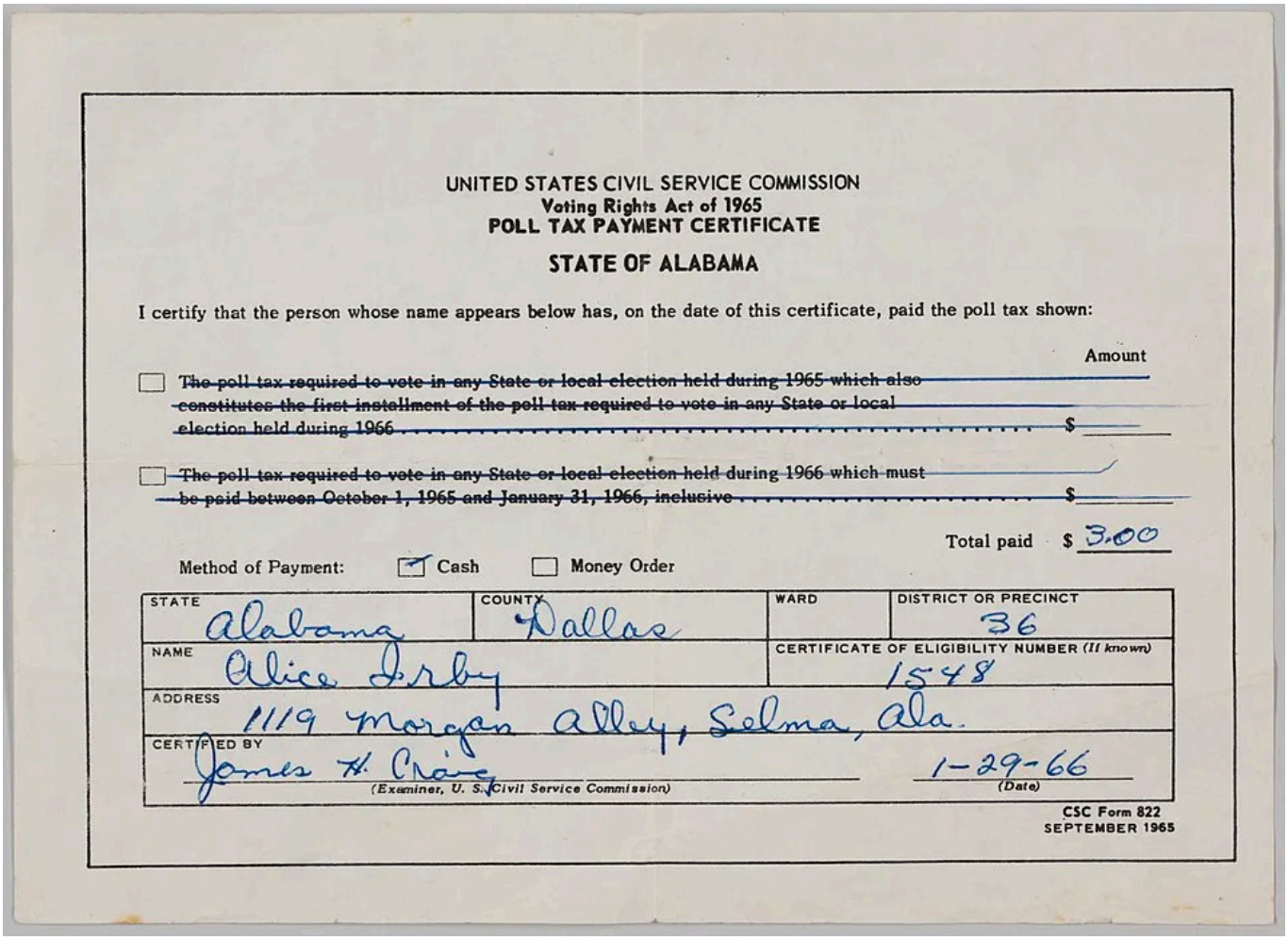
33% Higher than rural Georgia, but still constrained by literacy tests.

10. Charleston, South Carolina (Charleston County)

38% South Carolina was restrictive but not as violently suppressive as Alabama or Mississippi.

Every Deep South state used some combination of:

- Literacy tests
- Poll taxes
- “Good character” clauses
- Voucher requirements (a registered voter had to vouch for you — impossible when no Black people were registered)
- Purges of voter rolls
- White-only primaries (until struck down in 1944, but the culture persisted)



UNITED STATES CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION
Voting Rights Act of 1965
POLL TAX PAYMENT CERTIFICATE

STATE OF ALABAMA

I certify that the person whose name appears below has, on the date of this certificate, paid the poll tax shown:

Amount

☐ ~~The poll tax required to vote in any State or local election held during 1965 which also constitutes the first installment of the poll tax required to vote in any State or local election held during 1966~~ . . . . . $

☐ ~~The poll tax required to vote in any State or local election held during 1966 which must be paid between October 1, 1965 and January 31, 1966, inclusive~~ . . . . . $

Total paid $ 3.00

Method of Payment: ☑ Cash ☐ Money Order

STATE	COUNTY	WARD	DISTRICT OR PRECINCT
Alabama	Dallas		36

NAME: Alice Irby
CERTIFICATE OF ELIGIBILITY NUMBER (If known): 1548
ADDRESS: 1119 Morgan Alley, Selma, Ala.
CERTIFIED BY: James H. Craig (Examiner, U. S. Civil Service Commission) 1-29-66 (Date)

CSC Form 822
SEPTEMBER 1965

https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2017.65, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

These laws were written to appear “race-neutral” but were enforced exclusively against Black applicants. That’s why it was important to be able to document racism with statistics instead of having to show intent, which is what the Supreme Court (SCOTUS) just said while effectively killing the VRA in its 2026 Louisiana v. Callais decision. America’s courts just reverted to 1965, where as long as you didn’t say you were being racist, you could be as racist as you wanted to be.

It wasn’t as if America had been cured of racist behavior intended to suppress votes. In 2015, during the height of the Voter ID movement, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) announced closures and service reductions at 31 driver's license offices, many of them in the Black Belt.

- Several majority-Black counties were left with only one day of service per month.
- Some counties lost their only licensing office entirely.

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund later described the 2015 decision as “an egregious act of racial discrimination” because it disproportionately harmed Black residents who needed a photo ID to vote. This was an exact parallel to when white registrars were only open to register voters in Black areas a few days a month in 1965

The closures and reductions hit nine majority-Black counties in the Black Belt. These counties already had some of the lowest car-ownership rates and the highest poverty rates in the state, meaning the cuts had the greatest impact. Alabama had implemented a photo ID requirement for voting in 2014. Cutting DMV access in Black Belt counties the very next year meant:

- Fewer opportunities to obtain the required ID
- Longer travel distances (often 30–60+ miles)
- Higher transportation costs
- Reduced ability to vote in upcoming elections

The U.S. Department of Transportation later investigated and reached an agreement with Alabama to restore full hours in these counties.

When SCOTUS began its murder of the VRA with the Shelby v. Holder decision in 2013, it eliminated the preclearance requirement before implementing major voting changes. States immediately went to work, returning to the 1965 status quo.

1. Texas implemented its strict voter ID law within hours

- The same day as the ruling, Texas announced that its previously blocked SB 14 photo ID law would take effect immediately.
- This law had been rejected under preclearance for disproportionately burdening Black and Latino voters.

This was the fastest post-Shelby action in the country.

2. Mississippi and Alabama activated their photo ID laws

Both states had passed strict ID laws earlier, but could not enforce them under Section 5.

After Shelby:

- Mississippi implemented its law for the 2014 elections.
- Alabama also implemented its law in 2014.

These laws had been frozen because they disproportionately affected Black voters in Black Belt counties.

3. North Carolina passed one of the broadest voting-restriction bills in modern history

Within weeks, North Carolina enacted HB 589, which:

- Cut early voting
- Eliminated same-day registration
- Ended out-of-precinct voting

- Imposed a strict voter ID
- Reduced pre-registration for teens
- Closed polling places in Black communities

A federal court later ruled the law targeted Black voters “with almost surgical precision.” This law would have required preclearance and almost certainly would have been blocked.

4. Florida resumed voter-roll purges previously halted under preclearance

Florida restarted a purge program that had been stopped because it disproportionately flagged Latino and Black voters as “non-citizens.”

Without preclearance, the state no longer needed federal approval.

5. Georgia began aggressive polling-place closures

Between 2013 and 2018, Georgia closed 214 polling places, mostly in:

- Majority-Black counties
- Rural Black Belt communities

Under preclearance, these closures would have required federal review.

6. Local jurisdictions across the South changed election rules overnight

Counties and cities that had been covered by Section 5 immediately began:

- Moving polling locations
- Consolidating precincts
- Changing district lines
- Switching from district to at-large elections
- Reducing early-voting hours

These changes had previously required DOJ approval.

7. Texas and Alabama closed or reduced hours at DMV offices

Because strict voter ID laws were now in effect, access to IDs became a voting issue.

- Alabama (2015) closed or reduced hours at 31 DMV offices — many in Black Belt counties — leaving some with one day per month of service.
- Texas reduced the number of mobile ID units and limited outreach.

These actions would have triggered preclearance review before 2013.

One might have the impression that voter suppression only took place in the Deep South, and the rest of America was exempt. Other states and communities had triggered the preclearance requirement based on historical patterns of racism.

Areas outside the Deep South that were covered by Section 5 preclearance

1. Alaska (statewide)

Covered because of discriminatory practices against Alaska Native voters, including:

- English-only literacy tests
- Denial of assistance to Native-language speakers

Alaska was fully covered from 1965 onward.

2. Arizona (statewide after 1975; partially before)

Originally covered in 1965 for:

- English-only literacy tests targeting Native voters

Expanded in 1975 to full statewide coverage due to discrimination against:

- Native Americans
- Spanish-speaking voters

3. New York (specific counties)

Covered jurisdictions included:

- Bronx County
- Kings County (Brooklyn)
- New York County (Manhattan)
- Queens County

These were covered because of discrimination against Puerto Rican and other Spanish-speaking voters, especially through English-only election materials.

4. California (specific counties)

Covered counties included:

- Kings County
- Merced County
- Monterey County
- Yuba County

These areas had histories of discrimination against Spanish-speaking and Asian American voters.

5. Michigan (one township)

- Buena Vista Township (Saginaw County)

Covered due to discrimination against Black voters in local elections.

6. South Dakota (specific counties)

Covered counties included:

- Shannon County (now Oglala Lakota County)
- Todd County
- Bennett County

These areas had long histories of discrimination against Lakota voters.

7. New Hampshire (specific towns)

Two small jurisdictions were covered because of English-only election practices affecting French-speaking and Native voters:

- Merrimack
- Brentwood

(These were later "bailed out" after demonstrating compliance.)

In the Shelby decision, SCOTUS pointed out that it was unfair to single out particular states and communities for their racist behavior. Chief Justice Roberts wrote that the VRA's coverage formula: "differentiates between the States" in a way that "is no longer justified." Roberts went on to say that

> "Current burdens must be justified by current needs."

Because the formula relied on data from 40–50-year-old individuals, the Court said it no longer reflected current conditions. Roberts said that limited preclearance was "A dramatic departure from the principle that all States enjoy equal sovereignty."

I'm going to agree with John Roberts on this one thing. It wasn't right to limit preclearance to specific states and communities when the whole country is and was racist to some degree. How was Indiana, at one time home to the largest and most influential groups of the Ku Klux Klan, left out for preclearance?

Throughout the 1960s, many Indiana cities — including Indianapolis — used at-large city-council elections, which allowed white majorities to override Black neighborhoods. This was a common Northern tactic to prevent Black communities from electing local representatives even when they were concentrated in specific wards.

Indiana's legislative maps in the early 1960s were drawn to:

- Pack Black voters into a small number of districts
- Crack Black neighborhoods across multiple white-majority districts

This was documented in civil-rights litigation and DOJ investigations after the VRA's passage

Illinois was not covered by Section 5 preclearance, but it engaged in several documented suppression tactics. These align with broader patterns described in national analyses of 1960s voter suppression, including those highlighted by the Fair Elections Center and academic research.

Northern Republican operatives increasingly used poll-challenger laws to target Black and Latino voters in cities where they were concentrated. These challenges were legal on paper but used discriminatorily. Chicago and other Illinois cities used racially motivated districting and at-large election systems to dilute Black voting strength.

Because Illinois did not meet the Section 4(b) formula (it did not use literacy tests and had registration above 50%), it avoided preclearance — even though the Fair Elections Center notes that 21 states nationwide used discriminatory devices in 1964, including several Northern states.

Illinois was not one of the states using literacy tests, but it was one of the states that "barely avoided coverage," meaning its practices were close to triggering federal scrutiny.

Either in anticipation of the Louisiana v. Callais decision or directly afterward, several states have taken action to prove how little has changed since 1965. The ruling, issued on April 29, 2026, sharply limited voters of color's ability to challenge discriminatory maps, and states responded accordingly.

1. Actions States Took Before the Callais Decision (Anticipation)

Even before the ruling, states understood the Court was preparing to weaken Section 2. The Court's signals during oral argument (October 2025) and the framing of the questions presented led several states to act preemptively.

A. Passing aggressive maps assuming Section 2 would be weakened

States such as Alabama, Georgia, Texas, and South Carolina advanced maps that:

- Reduced or eliminated minority opportunity districts
- Relied heavily on partisan-justification defenses
- Positioned themselves to argue that race-based remedies were unconstitutional

These moves anticipated the Court's eventual holding that compliance with the VRA is not a compelling interest for race-conscious districting.

B. Filing amicus briefs urging the Court to limit Section 2

Multiple Republican-led states filed briefs arguing that:

- Section 2 should not require the creation of majority-minority districts
- Race-conscious map-drawing violates equal protection
- The Gingles framework should be narrowed

These arguments align with the Court's eventual ruling.

2. Actions States Took Immediately After the Callais Decision (Direct Response)

The ruling "all but nullifies" Section 2's protections for minority voters. States responded quickly.

A. Moving to redraw congressional and legislative maps without fear of Section 2 challenges

Because the Court held that the VRA did not require Louisiana to create a second Black-majority district — and raised the burden of proving discrimination — states now have far more freedom to:

- Eliminate existing minority districts
- Consolidate or crack Black and Latino communities
- Prioritize incumbent protection and partisan goals over minority representation

B. Preparing to reshape local power structures

The ruling applies not just to Congress but to:

- State legislatures
- County commissions
- City councils
- School boards

States and localities can now redraw these maps with minimal federal constraint.

C. Accelerating mid-decade redistricting

The Stateline report notes that states are already considering or planning mid-cycle redraws — something that would have been far riskier under the old Section 2 standard.

D. Preparing to defend racially skewed maps by citing "partisan" explanations

Because Callais requires plaintiffs to prove that racial bloc voting cannot be explained by partisanship, states now have a powerful shield:

- They can claim racial patterns are "just partisan behavior," making Section 2 claims far harder to win.

E. Reducing the weight of historical discrimination evidence

The Court held that "discrimination that occurred some time ago" and "effects of societal discrimination" carry little weight. States can now argue that:

- Past discrimination is irrelevant

- Present disparities are not proof of intentional discrimination

This invites states to roll back minority districts created after the 1990, 2000, and 2010 cycles.

3. What to Expect Next

Experts cited in Stateline predict:

- A wave of litigation testing how far states can go
- Rapid erosion of minority-opportunity districts
- Major shifts in school board and judicial elections
- A reshaping of political power “up and down the ballot” in the South

The rush to “make America great again” looks less like a leap forward and more like a determined march back to 1965 — back to the era when access to the ballot box depended on where you lived, what you looked like, and whether the people in power believed you deserved a voice at all. The tools have changed, but the architecture is familiar: polling-place closures instead of poll taxes, ID restrictions instead of literacy tests, redistricting software instead of county registrars with rubber stamps. The language is softer, the tactics more technical, but the effect is the same.

What we are watching now is not nostalgia; it is policy. Not memory, but method. A deliberate return to a time when the rules were written to keep some Americans in and others out — and when the promise of democracy was conditional, fragile, and endlessly deferred. The question is no longer whether the past is repeating itself. It’s whether we recognize the repetition

quickly enough to stop mistaking regression for restoration, or exclusion for greatness.

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