

JOHNSON'S LEGACY TODAY: DO WE LIVE IN A GREAT SOCIETY?

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous presidency. In this 10-week series, we'll explore the legacy of Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and how decisions made 50 years ago continue to resonate in modern America. Today's topic: The Voting Rights Act of 1965.

JOHNSON AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965

Events Leading up to the Voting Rights Act

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was written for the advancement for minorities, it did not prohibit voting discrimination. Johnson was unsatisfied with this gap and privately pushed legislation for a tough voting rights act. He was still concerned about the opinion of Southern Democrats and was hesitant to publicly promote a voting rights bill shortly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. However, drastic civil rights measures needed to be taken. In January of 1965, marches and demonstrations in Selma, Alabama led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders led to hundreds of arrests, including Dr. King's; along with national media coverage.

King's "Letter from a Selma Jail" and Malcolm X's involvement in the movement prompted Johnson to formally step in to send a proposal to Congress. However, the content of the proposal was still undisclosed. Additional voting rights marches in Alabama in February erupted in violence. On a march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7, 1965, police attacked and shot tear gas at the peaceful protesters. The televised footage of this violence spurred Johnson's address to a joint session of Congress on March 15. In this speech, Johnson said:

"This act flows from a clear and simple wrong. Its only purpose is to right that wrong. Millions of Americans are denied the right to vote because of their color. This law will ensure them the right to vote. The wrong is one which no American, in his heart, can justify. The right is one which no American, true to our principles, can deny."

<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4034>

He also detailed the injustices incurred by blacks when attempting to vote. Some people were told that they were at the wrong polling location or time, had filled out their application incorrectly or had insufficient literacy skills. Some blacks were even asked to recite portions of the Constitution, a demand not made of whites. While some injustices were addressed on a case-by-case basis in legislative hearings, a new discriminatory action would occur just after the previous had been declared unconstitutional. Two days after his speech, Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act to Congress.

Provisions of and Response to the Voting Rights Act

Intended to enforce the 15th amendment of the Constitution which granted African-American men the right to vote, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting by abolishing literacy tests and poll taxes aimed at African-

Americans. Despite resistance and lack of enforcement in many southern states, African-American voter registration soared. By 1968, nearly 60 percent of eligible African-American citizens were registered in Mississippi; other states soon followed.

The Voting Rights Act significantly changed the relationship between state and federal governments' involvement in voting. It was expanded in 1970, 1975 and 1982, and continues to serve as an impactful piece of civil rights legislation. In 2013, the Supreme Court overturned a portion of the Act that required certain state and local governments to get approval from the federal government before changing their voting laws. The Court's opinion acknowledged that voter discrimination still exists, but a majority of the Court concluded that federal approval of voting law changes by some state and local governments was no longer justified.



Voting rights continues to be controversial. Much recent attention has been drawn to "Voter ID" legislation in a number of states that would require voters to provide certain types of identification before being permitted to cast their vote.

CURRENT CONNECTION

A more recent federal proposal that would grant additional opportunities to minorities is the DREAM Act. DREAM stands for Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors. The act would grant qualified, unauthorized immigrant youth who entered the U.S. by age 15 opportunities for a six-year path to citizenship after completion of a college degree and two years of military service. Research the provisions of the DREAM Act at dreamact.info and answer the following questions:

- How does current legislation for undocumented youth such as the federal DREAM Act compare to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
- Who would be eligible for benefits under the proposed DREAM Act?
- Why was the DREAM Act proposed?
- What discrepancies are there in civil rights today that were not recognized 50 years ago?

CORRECTION

The second article of the series on October 29th read:

"Lyndon B. Johnson fought for discrimination against blacks in particular."

It should have read: *"Lyndon B. Johnson fought against discrimination of blacks in particular."*