

Voter Suppression and Literacy Tests

AFTER RECONSTRUCTION, LEGIONS of white people did their utmost to ensure white rule—to keep black men from voting, to prevent black America from having any real political power. (While some black men did hold political office after Reconstruction, the numbers dwindled and dwindled.)

Black voter suppression really ramped up in 1890 when the Magnolia State passed what became known as the Mississippi Plan: a dizzying array of poll taxes; literacy tests; understanding clauses (which officials used to justify registering some white illiterate people who they claimed understood the information read to them); newfangled voter registration rules; and “good character” clauses. All were racially discriminatory, but they were pitched as simply a way to bring “integrity” to the polls.

Virginia state senator Carter Glass, like many other white politicians, swooned at the thought of bringing the Mississippi Plan to his state. During Virginia’s 1901-2 state constitutional convention, Glass championed a plan that would “eliminate the darkey as a political factor in this state in less than five years.”

“Will it not be done by fraud and discrimination?” asked a fellow delegate.

“By fraud, no. By discrimination, yes,” replied Glass. “Discrimination! Why, that is precisely what we propose. That, exactly, is what this Convention was elected for—to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the Federal Constitution, with a view to the elimination of every negro voter who can be gotten rid of, legally, without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate.”

But the drive to wipe out the black vote would hurt poor and illiterate white people. And for many of those in power, that was just fine.

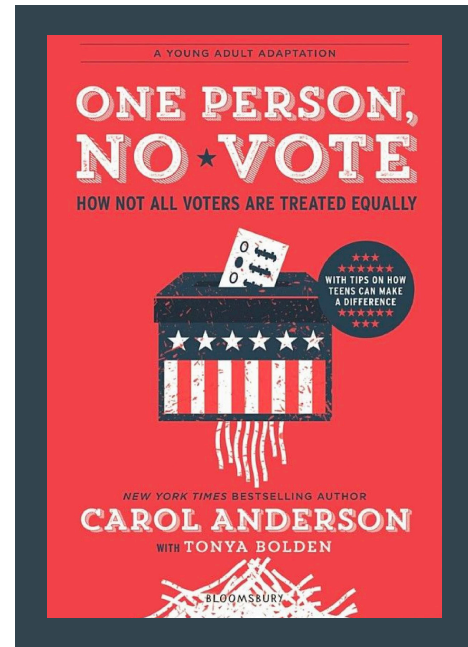
For some it was the point.

Mississippi’s Eaton Bowers, who served in Congress in the early 1900s, later said that his state’s new constitution had disenfranchised “the ignorant and vicious white” voter along with black voters. He stated that Mississippi’s eligible voters were “now confined to those, and to those alone, who are qualified by intelligence and character for the proper and patriotic exercise of this great franchise.” While there was a steady erosion of white voters, the collapse of black voter turnout was precipitous.

In 1946—fifty-six years after the Mississippi Plan was unveiled—Mississippi Senator Theodore


Bilbo, one of the most virulent racists to walk the halls of Congress, boasted of the chicanery. “What keeps ‘em [blacks] from voting is section 244 of the [Mississippi] Constitution of 1890. ... It says that a man to register must be able to read and explain the Constitution or explain the Constitution when read to him.” Senator James Zachariah George, the “father” of that 1890 state constitution, bragged Bilbo crafted a document few white men and no black people could explain.

The literacy test and understanding clause were tailor-made for societies that systematically refused to educate millions of their citizens and ensured that the bulk of the population remained functionally illiterate. By 1940, more than half of all black adults in Mississippi had fewer than five



years of formal education. Almost 12 percent had no schooling whatsoever. The figures were worse in South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia, and Alabama. During World War II, for example, Louisiana spent almost four times as much per capita on white elementary schoolchildren as on black ones. What's more, for most of the twentieth century, many Jim Crow school systems did not have high schools for black teens.

Deliberate underfunding of black schools was critical to the disenfranchising success of literacy tests.



A sample passage from Alabama's constitution, which could be part of a literacy test that a would-be black voter might have to read and explain circa 1965:

➔ **SECTION 260**

The income arising from the sixteenth section trust fund, the surplus revenue fund, until it is called for by the United States government, and the funds enumerated in sections 257 and 258 of this Constitution, together with a special annual tax of thirty cents on each one hundred dollars of taxable property in this state, which the legislature shall levy, shall be applied to the support and maintenance of the public schools, and it shall be the duty of the legislature to increase the public school fund from time to time as the necessity therefor and the condition of the treasury and the resources of the state may justify; provided, that nothing herein contained shall be so construed as to authorize the legislature to levy in any one year a greater rate of state taxation for all purposes, including schools, than