

A Brief History of Voter Suppression Efforts in the United States

EARLY U.S. DISENFRANCHISEMENT

1776-1779—From the beginning of what would become the United States, colonialists granted only white men with property the right to vote. However, white men who identified as Catholic, Jewish or a Quaker are barred from voting.

RECONSTRUCTION ERA

Dec. 3, 1867—President Andrew Johnson sets the tone for disenfranchising Black Americans in his annual message to Congress. He said, “Negroes have shown less capacity for government than any other race of people. No independent government of any form has ever been successful in their hands. On the contrary, wherever they have been left to their own devices, they have shown a constant tendency to relapse into barbarism.”

Sept. 28, 1868—The Opelousas Massacre begins in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, when white men murdered an estimated 250 people, mostly Black Americans, to suppress Black voters. Earlier that year, Louisiana voters ratified a new state constitution, giving Black men the right to vote.

April 13, 1873—The Colfax Massacre follows a contested gubernatorial election as a mob of about 150 white residents violently reacted to a shift in political power. Between 60 and 150 Black people were killed. The massacre was enacted to maintain white supremacy and it set the stage for Jim Crow laws.

POST RECONSTRUCTION ERA

May 6, 1882—The Chinese Exclusion Act is signed into law. In addition to banning immigration from China and other Asian countries, the act prohibited naturalization. Asian Americans were unable to vote, as they weren’t considered citizens.

Feb. 8, 1887—The Dawes General Allotment Act grants citizenship only to Native Americans who give up their tribal affiliations.

Aug. 12, 1890—Mississippi’s constitution convention begins and one of its objectives was to disenfranchise Black people.

Nov. 10, 1898—The Wilmington Insurrection happens when an armed mob of 2,000 white men in Wilmington, North Carolina, destroyed a Black-owned newspaper, deposed an interracial city government and installed a white mayor and other officials. At least 60 people were murdered.

Aug. 18, 1920—The 19th amendment is ratified and women gain the right to vote. But many Black women, particularly those in the Southern states, remained disenfranchised.

Nov. 2, 1920—The Ocoee Massacre occurred on Election Day when Black residents in Ocoee, Florida, attempted to exercise their right to vote.

Nov. 2, 1928—The Arizona Supreme Court rules that Indigenous people living on reservations were under guardianship, and thus, unable to vote. The ruling was eventually overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

March 7, 1965—On Bloody Sunday, about 600 people set out on a 50-mile trek to Montgomery—Alabama’s state capital—in a campaign to demand that their right to vote be enshrined in law. Many were violently beaten by Alabama State Troopers.

POST VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965

June 25, 2013—In the landmark case, *Shelby County v. Holder*, the U.S. Supreme Court gutted a critical provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) which protected voters of color. Section 5 of the VRA required states that historically discriminated against voters of color to submit any changes to its voting laws to the U.S. Department of Justice for “preclearance.” The absence of this provision immediately led to numerous states passing restrictive voter laws.

Jan. 6, 2021—On this day, thousands of President Trump supporters attacked the Capitol in an effort to reverse the results of a free and fair election.

March 25, 2021—Georgia’s anti-voting rights bill is signed into law, restricting access to the ballot.

Nov. 4, 2021—Alabama governor Kay Ivey signs newly redrawn congressional maps into law. Black voters and voting rights organizations assert that the redistricting violates Section 2 of the VRA as the new map packs Black people into one district but divides other groups of Black voters across other districts, essentially diluting their voting power.

May 6, 2021—Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signs restrictive voting bill SB90 into law. The law makes it harder to cast a vote by mail including limiting access to the ballot and penalizing voters who drop off someone else’s vote-by-mail ballot.

July 1, 2021—In *Brnovich v. DNC*, the U.S. Supreme Court reinterpreted another important section of the VRA. The court’s ruling makes it more difficult to challenge discriminatory voting laws in court.