

This Day in History... August 6, 1965

Voting Rights Act of 1965

On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, giving the federal government powerful new tools to confront racial discrimination at the polls. The law followed decades of blocked registrations, intimidation, and a voting-rights campaign that drew national attention to Selma, Alabama.

The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, declared that voting rights could not be denied because of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Yet many Southern states found ways around that command after Reconstruction. Registration officials used literacy tests, complicated questionnaires, selective enforcement, and economic pressure to keep Black citizens from voting. Poll taxes also discouraged poor voters, although the 24th Amendment prohibited them in federal elections in 1964.

Congress had tried to address the problem. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 created the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and authorized federal lawsuits to protect voting rights. It also established the US Commission on Civil Rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 required officials to preserve voting records and allowed courts to appoint voting referees. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited unequal registration standards. However, these measures often depended on slow, county-by-county lawsuits. Local resistance continued.

Civil rights organizations expanded voter-registration campaigns across the South. During Mississippi's 1964 Freedom Summer, workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered after investigating the burning of a Black church. Their deaths exposed the violence surrounding efforts to register Black voters.

The struggle became especially visible in Selma. Of about 15,000 Black residents of voting age, only 335 were registered. The Dallas County Voters League, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized demonstrations. On February 18, 1965, Alabama state trooper James Bonard Fowler shot activist Jimmie Lee Jackson during a protest in nearby Marion. Jackson died eight days later.

Activists responded by planning a 54-mile march from Selma to the state capital at Montgomery. On March 7, about 600 marchers, led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams, crossed Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. Alabama state troopers ordered them to disperse, then attacked with clubs and tear gas. Television footage of "Bloody Sunday" showed the violence to viewers across the country.

Eight days later, Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress. He called for legislation that would enforce the Constitution instead of leaving protection largely to local officials. "It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country," he declared.

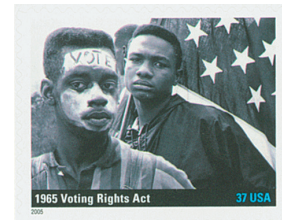
The bill suspended literacy tests and similar devices in places identified by a federal coverage formula. It authorized federal examiners to register qualified voters where local officials had obstructed registration. Section 5 required covered states and counties to obtain federal approval, known as preclearance, before changing election procedures. Section 2 prohibited racially discriminatory voting practices throughout the country.

Congress approved the final bill by wide margins. The House passed it 328–74 on August 3. The Senate accepted the final version 79–18 the next day. Johnson signed Public Law 89-110 on August 6 in the President's Room at the US Capitol, with civil rights leaders and lawmakers present.

The results came quickly. By the end of 1965, about 250,000 new Black voters had registered. Federal examiners registered roughly one-third of them. By the end of 1966, Black registration had reached at least 50 percent in nine of 13 Southern states.

Congress renewed and strengthened the act in 1970, 1975, and 1982. The 1975 amendments added protections for certain language-minority citizens. In the 2013 case of *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court invalidated the formula that determined which jurisdictions required preclearance. The

court further weakened Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act in the 2021 case, *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, and the 2026 case, *Louisiana v. Calais*. Other provisions, including the nationwide prohibition against racial discrimination in voting, remain in force.



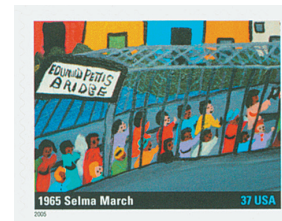
Stamp features a photo of young protesters at the Selma March.



The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included voting protections, outlawed segregation in many public accommodations and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to address workplace discrimination.



A state trooper fractured Lewis's skull on Bloody Sunday, but he later returned to Selma as a congressman to lead commemorative walks across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.



On March 21, 1965, about 3,200 marchers set out again under federal protection; four days later, their ranks had grown to roughly 25,000 at the Alabama State Capitol.

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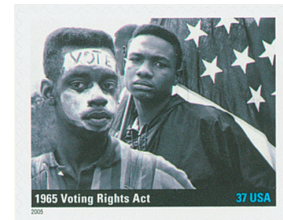
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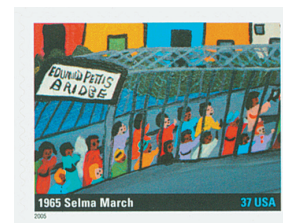
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