

Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-thernstrom31-2008aug31,0,218604.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

Opinion

Victory in the voting rights battle

Barack Obama's candidacy is one of many signs that the U.S. has turned a page.

By Abigail Thernstrom

August 31, 2008

We've come to the end of a remarkable journey. In the early 1960s, most Southern blacks were barred from voting. Yet today, just over four decades later, blacks and whites from across the country have selected an African American man as the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

The United States has undergone an extraordinary, awe-inspiring transformation -- particularly so for those who remember what the South was like not so long ago. In 1964, the right to vote remained a white privilege, despite the promise of the 15th Amendment. Blacks were routinely kept from the polls by fraudulent literacy tests, violence and intimidation. Without the franchise, they had little or no say in what policies their "representatives" in Congress might support, where state health dollars would go or which local streets would get sidewalks. To have the vote was to belong to the American community; the disfranchised had been stripped, in a fundamental sense, of their citizenship. There were, of course, no black elected officials from the South.

The fight for civil rights -- voting rights in particular -- was a long, difficult one. On March 7, 1965, John Lewis was in Selma, Ala., when state troopers used electric cattle prods, nightsticks and tear gas to suppress a peaceful voting rights march. In the South in 1965, blacks who were so "uppity" as to try to vote could find themselves without a job or credit at a store -- or with a bullet in the back. That's what happened to Medgar Evers, the Mississippi NAACP field secretary, in 1963.

But five months after that "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. The country did not change overnight, but within two years, the percentage of eligible blacks registered to vote in Mississippi climbed from 6.7% to 60%. Today, impediments to black voting have virtually disappeared, and Barack Obama, a black man serving his first term as a U.S. senator from Illinois, has an excellent chance of becoming president.

This is a well-known story, of course, but the fact is that despite the obvious gains, many people remain who still talk of black disfranchisement. Despite the sheer numbers -- today, for instance, there are 43 African Americans serving in Congress (including John Lewis) -- there's a sense that it's callous, and possibly even racist, to dare suggest that blacks have come a long way.

How can skeptics make such an argument? Some point to racially polarized voting as a sign of the hold of racism in elections. But to make this argument, they generally define all elections in which majorities of blacks and majorities of whites vote for different candidates as "polarized." By that standard, elections will never be free of racial taint until either half of all blacks vote Republican or roughly 85% of whites vote Democratic. In other words, "racism" will have disappeared only on the unlikely day when partisan group differences are gone.

Other skeptics point to the low number of blacks elected in majority-white communities as a sign that American politics has many miles still to travel. But when you think about it, that's really not so telling. Consider a politician such as James Clyburn, majority whip in the House of Representatives. Of course he's much more likely to be elected in a secure black district -- as are the other members of the Congressional Black Caucus who spoke at last week's convention, such as John Conyers, Charles Rangel and Maxine Waters.

That's partly because they run races that emphasize their racial identity, and partly because of their politics. Not a single one of these members of the caucus has been rated by the nonpartisan National Journal as having a remotely moderate political profile. Unlike Obama, who has an abbreviated political history and a relatively moderate image (despite his liberal voting record), they make no effort to present themselves as not-Jesse Jackson, post-racial candidates -- the kind of candidates who traditionally appeal to white voters as well as black voters.

As recently as the summer of 2006, in debating the renewal of the Voting Rights Act, a House Judiciary Committee report claimed: "Discrimination [in voting] today is more subtle than the visible methods used in 1965. However, the effects and results are the same."

The same! Discrimination unchanged since 1965, except in the degree of its subtlety! Can that be true? Can it be possible that beneath the patina of progress, the same old racist South exists -- more than 40 years after the passage of a law with extraordinary and effective powers to respond to the national emergency of black disfranchisement? One is tempted to ask whether the committee members have been living in a cave for 40 years. Today, in Mississippi alone, more than 900 blacks hold office, and

most Southern states have higher black registration rates than those outside the region.

How could the committee have published such an inane statement? Easy. On civil rights questions, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress take their cues from the leaders of civil rights groups, for whom pessimism has become deeply ingrained -- indeed, habitual. And that's a dangerous habit. It can act as a brake on progress. In 2006, for instance, Congress renewed "emergency" provisions of the Voting Rights Act that were originally meant to last only five years, and in doing so, it actually strengthened federal emergency powers in a way that was utterly out of step with today's voting problems. As voting rights scholar Richard L. Hasen noted, Congress squandered "an opportunity ... to take a more serious look at how it can fix its voting laws to better protect minority voting rights" in the 21st century.

Congress may not recognize that disfranchisement is a closed chapter in American history. But in a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll, 63% of blacks answered "yes" to the question: "Do you think it's possible your child could grow up to be president or not?" -- a higher figure than that for whites.

On Aug. 28, 1963, Dorie Ladner, a 21-year-old civil rights activist from Mississippi, listened to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and thought, "We're going to go back to Mississippi and get called [racial epithets] again. This isn't going to change anything." But today, she recently told the Washington Post, "Dr. King's dream ... is being fulfilled."

Whatever your politics, Barack Obama's moment is our moment too -- the end of one story and the beginning of another. A moment in which to celebrate.

Abigail Thernstrom is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and the vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2009 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:

