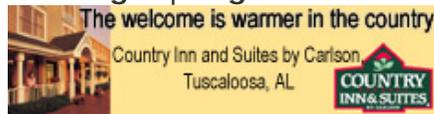


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Political power took winding path after passage of legislation

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By Dana Beyerle
Montgomery Bureau Chief
August 07, 2005 3:15AM

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MONTGOMERY | Saturday was the 40th anniversary of the law that ended legal barriers to voter registration for blacks. But passage of that law did not automatically lead to political power.

It was the first step in a journey that continues today.

After President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on Aug. 6, 1965, lawsuits and political actions during at least 35 years were necessary to produce an environment where blacks could be elected to virtually all public offices.

And that environment still needs federal oversight through continuation of a section of the Voting Rights Act next year, Ala-bama congressman Artur Davis said last week.

Voting rights attorney Ed Still of Birmingham called the 1965 law that outlawed poll taxes and voting tests the first generation of laws needed to break the white hold on voter registration in Alabama and the South, where blacks often made up 25 percent of the population.

"The second generation of issues came in the early 1970s and those were over trying to dismantle at-large [election] districts," Still said last week.

It took lawsuits, federal court rulings or state laws to create

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single-member city council, county commission, school board and legislative districts in which candidates looked like, thought like and were sympathetic to a majority of people in the district.

The groundwork took place as blacks began registering to vote in late 1965 and early 1966. Blacks began being elected in small areas in the late 1960s, but some majority-white towns and counties didn't have single-member districts until the 1980s.

In predominantly black Macon County in 1966, Lucius Amerson became the first black elected sheriff in the South since the 1870s.

In 1968, tiny Ridgeville in Etowah County incorporated, and blacks were elected to office. Ridgeville may have been the first town in Alabama with a black-led government, said city clerk Charles Adair.

In 1969 and 1970 Greene County became the first Alabama county led by blacks.

Blacks were elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1970. By 1983, blacks held most of the seats in the House and Senate from districts that today are majority black.

In other cases, it took decades to change politics.

Tuscaloosa, for example, had an appointed school board controlled by whites until state Rep. Bryant Melton, D-Tuscaloosa, passed a bill requiring single-member district elections in 2000, 35 years after the Voting Rights Act was signed.

Melton was the first black elected in Tuscaloosa County, in 1982 to the Legislature. He changed the face of government in the county, filing local bills to create single-member city, county and ultimately city school board districts.

"Resistance was there in at-large elections. But when blacks started swelling voting ranks and moderate whites started getting elected, we got more blacks elected," he said.

Melton's legal efforts to change the City Council and County Commission from small, at-large elected bodies to single-member districts led to the election of Joseph Mallisham as the first black county commissioner in 1985 and Charles Steele and John England Jr. as the first blacks elected to the city council in 1985, Melton said.

Now the fight is about reauthorizing a portion of the 1965 Civil Rights Act that requires federal justice department oversight of any voting change in Alabama and all or parts of about 18 other states.

Without oversight, called pre-clearance, blacks fear that backsliding could reverse electoral gains made during the last 40 years. That pre-clearance reconsideration is scheduled for

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next year.

Davis, D-Birmingham, is the second black elected to Congress representing Alabama since Reconstruction. He was elected in the predominantly black district that stretches from inner-city Birmingham to the Black Belt to just west of Montgomery.

Davis said the Voting Rights Act preserves the integrity and fairness of elections in states such as Alabama with histories of racial discrimination.

"I hope that Congress will promptly renew this act, which is set to expire after next year," Davis said. "By doing so, we would reaffirm our commitment to an election process free of racial barriers, and we would honor the memory of the incredibly brave Americans who risked their lives in order to make the right to vote a reality."

Melton said the law needs to be reapproved because of the comfort level it gives blacks like himself who can remember white opposition that kept them from registering to vote until 1965, four years after they were eligible. Melton was born in 1940.

"Eventually, we should get to a point where we don't have to have the federal government ride herd, and we can stand on our own two feet," Melton said. "But when you look at 1965 to now and look at where blacks were in the history of our country, [voting rights] is in its infancy."

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