

Background to the 2000 US election

Florida's legacy of voter disenfranchisement

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The disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Florida voters in the 2000 presidential election evoked deep-felt anger, especially among African Americans who only a few decades ago had to fight to win the right to vote in Florida and other Southern states.

With its tourist attractions, retirement communities and beachside resorts, Florida is rarely identified today with the “Deep South” and the legacy of racial oppression and violence with which states such as Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia are associated. But for nearly three quarters of a century Florida’s black citizens were denied the right to vote by Jim Crow laws and the murderous activities of the Ku Klux Klan and other racist organizations. A review of this history—a subject avoided by the news media throughout the election crisis—helps shed light on the magnitude of the attack on democratic rights that was carried out last November and December.

Between 1880 and 1910 Florida adopted literacy tests, property qualifications, “grandfather clauses” (which permitted an individual to vote only if his grandfather had, thereby excluding the descendants of slaves) and other measures to disenfranchise black voters. In 1889, the Florida legislature enacted the first poll tax in the South, a measure that would not be repealed until 1938. Florida was also among the first states to adopt a multiple ballot box law, which required voters to place eight separate ballots in eight separate ballot boxes. This measure was designed to take advantage of the high rates of illiteracy among the state’s black residents—officially 40 percent in 1900—who had difficulty placing the right ballot in the correct ballot box.

Florida’s current lifetime ban on voting by convicted felons—which disenfranchised nearly a third of all black males during the 2000 elections—dates back to the reactionary measures implemented in the late nineteenth century. At the time the state’s vagrancy laws and convict lease system—under which prison laborers were rented out to private contractors—allowed the authorities to jail blacks and poor whites on the flimsiest of charges, and strip them of their constitutional rights.

Local election officials even used the secret ballot law to take advantage of high illiteracy among blacks. Under the guise of protecting the integrity of the ballot, the state of Florida barred anyone from providing assistance to a voter even if he could not read.

According to Professor Darryl Paulson of the University of South Florida, these measures were brutally effective. In the presidential election of 1888, prior to the passage of the disenfranchising laws, 75 percent of adult male Floridians voted. By the time of the 1892 presidential election, with the voting barriers in place, only 39 percent of adult males voted. Black male turnout fell from 62 percent in 1888 to 11 percent in 1892.

One measure of the reaction that dominated Florida politics for nearly a century is the fact that Josiah Walls—a former slave and Union soldier, who was elected as Florida’s first black member of the US Congress in 1870—would be the state’s only black US congressman until November 1992. Although blacks made up anywhere from 10 to 50 percent of the state’s population within this time frame, it would also take a century

after the post-Civil War Reconstruction period for another African American to serve in the Florida state legislature.

In 1902, the Florida Democratic Party adopted a “white primary” policy, which excluded blacks from voting to nominate Democratic candidates for general elections. Given the Democrats’ ascendancy in the “one-party” South, this meant blacks were excluded from participating in the only elections that mattered.

Such laws, which defined political parties as private clubs that had the right to exclude certain classes of people from voting, were adopted throughout the South. Even after the Supreme Court struck down Texas’s white-only primary in 1944, the Florida legislature passed a law giving political parties inherent powers to restrict membership and in many counties blacks continued to be barred from joining the Democratic Party or participating in its primary elections.

If blacks found ways to overcome the array of legal obstacles to voting, state officials blocked the counting of their votes. One such method of vote fraud, for which Florida was notorious, was the use of tissue ballots and undersized ballots called “little jokers.” Election officials in areas with large black populations would stuff the ballot boxes so there would be more ballots than eligible voters. Officials would then eliminate the number of ballots equal to the excess by removing the tissue ballots and “little jokers” that had been given to black voters.

Alongside racist legal measures, the disenfranchisement of African Americans was enforced through violence and terror. From 1900 to the 1930s Florida had the highest per capita rate of lynching in the South: 4.5 lynchings for every 10,000 blacks. This was twice the rate of lynchings in Mississippi, Georgia and Louisiana, and three times that of Alabama. From 1921 to 1946 there were 61 reported lynchings in Florida—twice as many as in Alabama, and topped only by Mississippi (88) and Georgia (68).

During the 1920s white mobs carried out pogroms in Ocoee, near Orlando, and Perry and Rosewood near the Gulf Coast, burning homes and killing scores of African Americans. The rampage in Ocoee began after a black resident, shotgun in hand, demanded the right to vote.

In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan wielded enormous influence within the national Democratic Party. In Florida and throughout the South the Democrats sought to maintain the support of white small businessmen, farmers and laborers—who were being uprooted by the economic and social changes following World War I—on the basis of white supremacy and anti-black demagoguery. In Florida, the real estate boom and the development of large-scale agriculture in the 1920s led to rising profits for land speculators, developers and agribusiness. But tens of thousands of small farmers, particularly in the state’s northern counties, faced ruin from low farm prices. Basic social conditions, including rural diets, were no better in 1928 than they were in 1898.

During the Depression of the 1930s, while membership in the Klan fell throughout the US, in Florida the KKK continued to remain a force. With a statewide membership of about 30,000, the Klan was active in

Jacksonville, Miami, and the citrus belt from Orlando to Tampa. In the orange groves of central Florida, Klansmen still operated in the old night-riding style, intimidating blacks trying to vote.

In addition to terrorizing African Americans, the KKK targeted union organizers and socialists. The business establishment was anxious to prevent common struggles by black and white workers. Moreover, some unions paid poll taxes for poor black and white voters. One of the most notorious Klan incidents in Florida history occurred in Tampa in 1935, when Joseph Shoemaker, a socialist and labor organizer, was flogged, castrated, and tarred and feathered, before dying of his injuries.

During a 1934 debate on a federal anti-lynching law, Florida Democratic Senator Claude Pepper—a moderate by Southern standards—blurted out the racist philosophy that lay behind the violent disenfranchisement of black voters. “Whatever may be written into the Constitution,” he said, “however many soldiers may be stationed about the ballot boxes of the Southland, the colored race will not vote, because in doing so they endanger the supremacy of a race to which God has committed the destiny of a continent.”

Harry T. Moore

A pioneer and martyr in the struggle for black voting rights during the 1930s and 1940s was Harry T. Moore, a Florida school teacher who became state leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1944 Moore co-founded the Progressive Voters League, which registered 100,000 new black voters over the subsequent six years. By 1951, due in large part to his efforts, 31 percent of all eligible blacks in Florida were registered to vote, a rate that was 50 percent higher than any other Southern state.

On Christmas night, December 25, 1951, Moore and his wife Harriette were killed when a bomb planted under their bedroom exploded at their home in Mims, Florida, near Cape Canaveral. Moore’s life and murder were the subject of a recent Public Broadcasting System television documentary, *Freedom Never Dies: The Story of Harry T. Moore*.

Moore joined the NAACP in 1933 and began teaching elementary school students about the vote, even though the state’s \$3 poll tax and “white-only” primaries all but excluded African Americans from voting. Moore saw the franchise as a weapon to remove officials who supported or were indifferent to the lynchings, mob violence and police brutality victimizing African Americans. He also saw the vote as a means of winning equal pay for black school teachers, equal funding for “colored” schools, and other social and civil rights.

Moore helped defeat efforts to reinstate a literacy test and maintain “white only” primaries on the county level, after the Florida Supreme Court struck down the practice. In May 1945, for the first time ever, over 30,000 blacks voted in the state’s Democratic primary, in what Moore described as the “greatest political activity among Florida Negroes since Reconstruction.” For his efforts, state and local officials branded him a “troublemaker” and “Negro organizer” and in 1946 the Brevard County School Board fired Moore after 20 years of service as a teacher.

In 1948, during the Truman administration, the Southern “Dixiecrat” wing of the Democrats rebelled against the national party’s plan to adopt a moderate civil rights plank. The Dixiecrats temporarily left the Democratic Party and formed the States’ Rights Party, running South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond for president.

In a leaflet issued at the time, Harry Moore said, “In 1948, as in 1860, we find the nation again divided on the race question. In 1860 it was called the slavery question. In 1948 it is called the question of civil rights. But the fundamental issue is the same in both cases. The basic question is

this: Shall America continue to treat Negroes as slaves, inferior beings, and second-class citizens, or shall Negroes be treated as free human beings, with all the rights and privileges of full citizenship? When this question was raised at the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia this year, the reaction was about the same as it was at the Democratic Convention in Charleston and Baltimore in 1860. The reactionary ‘States’ Rights’ slave holders walked out in 1860, held another convention in Richmond, and nominated Breckinridge of Kentucky. The reactionary Dixiecrats walked out again in 1948, journeyed to Birmingham, and nominated Thurmond of South Carolina.”

Moore was a vocal opponent of lynchings and frame-ups, which were employed to terrorize increasingly restive black workers, including many who returned from World War II determined to end the indignities of Jim Crow segregation and virtual peonage in the citrus groves, lumber and turpentine camps and other work locations. Moore carried out his own investigations into such murders, including the drowning of a 15-year-old boy, who was tied up and forced to jump into the Suwanee River, in front of his father, because he had sent a Christmas card to a white girl.

The most celebrated case was that of the Groveland Four, which became known as “Florida’s Little Scottsboro,” a reference to the infamous Alabama frame-up of the 1930s. In July 1949, after four young men—including two returning soldiers—were accused of raping a white woman, white mobs burned down several black-owned homes and shot up black neighborhoods. The police killed one youth in a manhunt and tortured three others, who were later convicted by an all-white jury, with two sentenced to death.

Moore’s opposition to the frame-up pitted him against Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall, who was well known for his violence against striking fruit pickers and connections to the KKK. When he ran for reelection in November 1948, 250 hooded Klansmen paraded in support of McCall and Dixiecrat presidential candidate Strom Thurmond, with the aim of frightening black voters away from the polls.

After widespread national protests against the Groveland frame-up, the US Supreme Court ordered the retrial of two of the remaining defendants. But on November 6, 1951, McCall shot the young men—killing one—while transporting them to a hearing. McCall claimed that they had tried to escape, but the surviving prisoner said McCall pulled the young men out of his patrol car and tried to execute them. Moore’s public demand for McCall’s resignation was part of the widespread outrage that erupted throughout the nation following the shootings.

According to a 1999 biography by Florida journalist Ben Green (*Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America’s First Civil Rights Martyr*), Moore’s involvement in the Groveland case and efforts to register African American voters made him “the most hated black man in Florida.” Shortly before his murder, an NAACP associate warned Moore that a prominent white grove owner, CF Flake, the head of the Mims Citrus Exchange, had complained that Moore was “putting notions in niggers’ heads” and “his head ought to be broken.”

The bombing of Moore’s home in December 1951 was part of wave of KKK violence that became known as the Florida Terror. Between August and December of that year there were a dozen dynamitings, the targets including an African-American housing project, Jewish synagogues and Catholic churches in Miami, and, in Orlando, a new black high school and white-owned ice cream parlor that served blacks.

The anger of black workers and their determination to avenge the murders were captured in the “Ballad of Harry Moore” by black poet Langston Hughes, which concludes with the verses:

And this he says, our Harry Moore,
As from the grave he cries:
No bomb can kill the dreams I hold
For freedom never dies!
Freedom never dies, I say!

Freedom never dies!

(For the full text of the poem, see: <http://www.nbbd.com/godo/moore/ballad.html>)

Anxious to avoid further alienating the Dixiecrats, Democratic President Harry Truman did little to stop the racist violence. As *The Militant*, the newspaper of the then-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, declared on December 31, 1951: “The Truman administration brings the full power and resources of the government to bear in its persecution of radical and minority political groups, but it is indifferent and pretends helplessness in the face of a widespread Ku Klux Klan conspiracy to beat, bomb and shoot the Negro people into submission and acceptance of second-class citizenship.”

The FBI, led by J. Edgar Hoover—a staunch opponent of civil rights—conducted an investigation of the Moore bombing, but dropped the case without any convictions. To this day, no one has ever been held accountable for the murders.

The civil rights movement

The eruption of mass civil rights struggles throughout the South during the 1950s and 1960s led to the final dismantling of the Jim Crow system and the achievement of voting rights for African Americans. In addition to Alabama, Mississippi and other states, Florida was an important battleground in the struggle.

In 1955, African Americans in Florida’s state capital, Tallahassee, carried out a successful bus boycott, a year after a similar protest integrated public transport in Montgomery, Alabama. Sit-ins and demonstrations, led by Florida A & M students, occurred in the capital during the early 1960s; protesters defied bombings, beatings and mass arrests to integrate public facilities in St. Augustine, where Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders were arrested in 1964; and black sanitation workers waged a bitter four-month strike in St. Petersburg-Tampa in 1968. The latter struggle erupted into violence and coincided with the urban upheavals that spread across Florida and the US after King’s assassination in April 1968.

For the US political establishment and its Cold War propaganda campaign, the violent suppression of civil rights in the South proved an international embarrassment. Moreover, economic and demographic changes in the South had broken up the old sharecropping system and weakened the political base of the segregationists. In Florida, the massive migration of workers and retirees from the North, as well as the growing urbanization of the state, shifted political weight away from the rural northern and Panhandle counties, where the KKK and similar forces enjoyed most of their support.

In 1957 the Eisenhower administration proposed the extension of black voting rights in the South. The final bill, the first civil rights bill enacted since 1875, was trimmed to meet the opposition of Southern Democrats and lacked strong enforcement provisions. But the Civil Rights Act of 1957 did create a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department, authorized to prosecute registrars who obstructed the right of blacks to vote. The bill also established the United States Civil Rights Commission as an independent agency charged with gathering facts about voting rights violations and other civil rights infringements.

In 1964-65, the national exposure of the murders of civil rights workers registering black voters in Mississippi and the violent attack by state troopers against voting rights marchers in Selma, Alabama spurred the Johnson administration to support the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act prohibited several Southern states from using voting laws, practices or procedures, such as literacy tests and other devices, to

discriminate against voters on the basis of race, color or their reading or writing knowledge of the English language. The Act authorized the US Attorney to provide observers to register voters and monitor elections, and also required these states to submit any changes in their voting laws to the federal government for approval. The passage of the law followed the adoption of the 24th Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibited the use of poll taxes to deny voting rights.

By the early 1960s the registration rate among black voters in Florida had risen to 35-40 percent. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act it increased to nearly 60 percent. Throughout the South nearly one million new black voters were added to voting rolls by 1970. In 1975 Congress expanded the coverage of the Voting Rights Act to include political jurisdictions in Florida and other states with language minority groups, and required officials to furnish bilingual assistance to language minority citizens at all stages of the voting process and in all elections. It is noteworthy that in the recent presidential elections many Haitian American and Hispanic voters complained of being denied language assistance in the voting booth.

The 2000 elections

Florida in the year 2000 was vastly different from the Florida of the 1890s, the 1950s or even a decade ago. The state, which in 1900 was one of the least populated in the US, is now the fourth largest, growing by 3 million, or 24 percent, since 1990. According to the 2000 census, in the last decade more than one million Hispanics—mainly from Latin America—came to Florida, attracted by a large number of service jobs and the state’s bilingual resources.

Florida is today highly urbanized, with 90 percent of the population living in cities along the coasts and large numbers of people moving up from the heavily populated southern counties to central and northern Florida. The working class—made up of black, white and immigrant workers—is the predominant social force in Florida, as it is throughout the US.

Given the lack of popular support for George W. Bush’s reactionary social policies, the Republicans were able to install him in the White House only through the suppression of votes. Republican officials, including President Bush’s brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and Secretary of State Katherine Harris—the millionaire heiress of a Florida citrus tycoon—used their control over the state apparatus to obstruct likely Democratic voters from casting their ballots, or having them counted. This culminated in the decision by the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court to overturn a Florida high court ruling and stop a manual recount of votes.

In an astute comment made shortly after this decision, Evangeline Moore, the daughter of Harry T. Moore, said, “They killed my father, now they just throw out black votes.”

This experience raises critical political questions. In the 1950s and 1960s it was possible, despite the crippling effects of the civil rights movement’s reliance on the Democratic Party, to win significant gains through mass protest struggles. Today, no section of the political establishment is prepared to defend basic democratic rights, including the right to vote.

Democratic stalwart Jesse Jackson made a few protests at the time of the Florida vote controversy, but dropped them after criticisms by the *Wall Street Journal* and his wealthy financial backers. The Democratic Party as a whole put up no serious opposition to the hijacking of the election, and has since gone out of its way to proclaim the legitimacy of the Bush administration and collaborate in carrying out its right-wing agenda.

The defense of democratic rights has always been fundamentally a class question. In the past, the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South was aimed at preventing black and white laborers and farmers from waging a common political struggle against the economic forces that oppressed them. Today, America's ruling elite increasingly views the traditional forms of bourgeois democracy as an obstacle to its accumulation of wealth.

The defense of basic democratic rights is bound up with building a mass political party that will unite all working people to oppose the two parties of big business and reorganize society on the basis of genuine democracy and social equality, to serve the interests of the vast majority rather than the wealthy few.



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