

The Right To Vote

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For decades following the passage of the 19th Amendment, Black Americans attempted unsuccessfully to vote in Texas and elsewhere across the South. The justification used for denying people of color the right to vote was the need to preserve “the purity of the ballot box”.



Courtesy of Texas State Historical Association Fair Use Image

Lonnie E. Smith, a Houston dentist, in a case brought by the NAACP under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, sued the state, demanding redress based upon the denial of his 14th and 15th amendment rights.



On April 3rd 1944, in the landmark case, *Smith v. Allwright*, the Supreme Court ruled 8 to 1 that state elections were public and therefore protected by the Constitution. For the first time, Black Americans across the South were permitted to vote.



Photo from *The Springfield Union*, April 4, 1944



Reverend Raphael Warnock, newly elected Senator from Georgia, in his maiden speech to the U.S. Senate on March 18th 2021, said “I believe that democracy is ... the sacred work of all human beings ... we all have within us ... the right to participate in the shaping of our destiny”.

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In May, 2021, the legislature in the state of Texas, which already had the most restrictive voting laws in the country, attempted to pass even greater restrictions on voting. These new restrictions, dubbed “echoes of Jim Crow laws” were aimed primarily at voters of color. They used the “purity of the ballot box” phrase in the state constitution as one of many justifications for the new laws.



When called out on the obvious racism of their intent, the phrase was removed. However, on May 7th 2021, Senate Bill 7 passed, further restricting the right of citizens to vote in Texas. Forty-six other states have or are attempting to pass similar legislation.

A government of the people, by the people, and for the people cannot flourish without the ability of all citizens to vote. Without the right to vote, history’s greatest experiment in democracy will perish from the earth.

