Thirty years ago...

today, official efforts to keep black people from registering to vote were ended by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Voting Rights Act led to a sharp rise in the number of black voters and transformed politics in Louisiana and the rest of the South.

Voting Rights Act made big change, still stirs debate

BY FRED KALMBACH

Local officials, especially in the South, used poll taxes, literacy tests and quizzes on the Constitution to shut potential black voters out of politics. Black people who did register often were purged from the rolls or intimidated into staying home on election day.

The decision to register someone to vote rested entirely in the hands of white registrars, said Southern University political historian Frank Ransburg.

Some Louisiana registrars were more sympathetic to black people than others, causing inconsistencies from parish to parish, he said.

A registrar could seize on a spelling error, a mistake in the exact age of a potential voter or an incorrect answer on a quiz to keep a black resident from registering, he said.

"The registrar was the sole judge," Ransburg said. "No one could appeal."

Ten years after Wilson first joined the voting rolls, registration tests were still being used in East Feliciana Parish.

Harriet Sensley recalls sitting on the stairs of the registrar's office with other black residents in 1963, eagerly questioning friends coming down after taking the test.

"Everybody would ask, 'Did you pass? Did you pass?'" Sensley said.

Sensley, who at the time was a college student, said she passed because she studied hard for the examination.

But many others didn't, she said. A large part of the parish's black population lacked even a fifth- or sixth-grade education, she said.

On Aug. 6, 1965 -- a few months after the nation saw televised footage of violence against civil rights demonstrators in Alabama -- President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

The act suspended the use of literacy and similar voter registration tests.

It also authorized the federal government to send its own officials into Southern states to supervise the registration process.

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Harriet Sensley, 59, sits by the door of the office where she registered to vote 32 years ago in East Feliciana Parish. In her hands is the test she had to pass to register.
Black voters in Louisiana: then and now

U.S. Rep. Cleo Fields, a candidate for governor, helps 82-year-old Fred Brooks register to vote. Fields’ district, drawn to be majority black, is now being challenged in federal court.

--- Rep. Cleo Fields

"It (the Voting Rights Act) provided me a guarantee to be elected to Congress, but an opportunity to get elected. In a real sense, the Voting Rights Act is a bridge, was lucky enough to be able to cross it. I'm not going to let them burn it behind me."

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In 1965, the South had only 72 black elected officials, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. By 1976, there were 1,944. Today there are about 5,000. That growth is reflected in Louisiana, according to statistics compiled since 1970 by the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C. In 1970, Louisiana had 65 black elected officials. By 1980, that number reached 363. Today, 227 of the 4,880 elected officials in Louisiana, or about 17 percent, are black, according to the secretary of state’s office.

Joe Delpi, Baton Rouge's first black council member, says the huge jump in black voters after 1965 was key in his 1968 victory. But also crucial was the attitude of whites, he said.

At the time, race riots and other disturbances were rocking cities throughout the nation.

Many whites here felt it was important for blacks to have representation, partly as a way to defuse black anger at being shut out of the political system, Delpi said.

With some white support at the polls, Delpi won. That kind of victory alone, however, would have left blacks with only a "token" representation, Delpi said.

Using the Voting Rights Act, blacks successfully attacked at-large elections that diluted their strength at the polls, and pushed for redrawn districts to ensure black majorities.

Without that kind of legal tool, blacks wouldn’t be holding nearly as many offices as they are today, Delpi said.

Many civil rights advocates now fear the U.S. Supreme Court is taking away their ability to make such gains.

In a landmark decision in June, the high court struck down a plan in Georgia that created three majority-black districts.

In a 5-4 decision, the court ruled race was the predominant factor in drawing the districts, which made the plan unconstitutional.

At the same time, the court cited procedural reasons in rejecting a challenge to a Louisiana congressional district that was drawn to be majority black. That case is now back in lower courts.

In the Georgia case, the U.S. Justice Department had relied on the Voting Rights Act to push Georgia into drawing a third majority-black district.

The Voting Rights Act requires local governments in certain areas of the country, including the South, to get approval from the Justice Department for any changes in election procedures.

That provision is aimed at states with a history of official discrimination against blacks.

Abigail Thernstrom, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, said the Justice Department has abused that role.

"It's being used ridiculously," Thernstrom said. "It's a total distortion of the act."

The Voting Rights Act was meant to give minorities equal access to politics, not to force the drawing of districts to guarantee them a certain number of representatives, she said.

The Justice Department has used the Voting Rights Act to cram majority-black districts down the throats of the states, said Thernstrom, whose writings were cited in a key 1995 U.S. Supreme Court decision on voting districts.

Thernstrom also said she thinks the section of the act that requires Justice Department approval of voting changes has served its purpose and should be ended.

"Blacks are now political players," she said.

Those arguments don't sit well with many civil rights activists and black politicians. Some point to Louisiana as an example.


That election was in the state's first majority-black district, the ACLU is quick to note. When a second majority-black district was drawn in 1992, the state's second black representative since Reconstruction was elected.

That district—Louisiana's 4th, held by Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge—is now under attack in the courts following the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision.

Both of those congressmen are going for re-election in a race that marks the first time two black candidates have run for the office. Louisiana hasn't had a black governor since Reconstruction, Fields said.

"It provided me a guarantee to be elected to Congress, but an opportunity to get elected," Fields said.

Fields said the Voting Rights Act, both in its original form and the shape it has taken since then, was the work of both blacks and whites seeking equal treatment for their co-citizens.

Fields said he will do what he can to fight any assault on the law.

"It's in a real sense, the Voting Rights Act is a bridge," Fields said. "I was lucky enough to be able to cross it. I'm not going to let them burn it behind me."

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