

Voting and Civil Rights Across the 20th Century

The United States first passed a Civil Rights Act in 1875, five years after the ratification of the 15th Amendment, which prohibited racial restrictions for voting rights. The Act assured access for all Americans to “public accommodations,” integrating common spaces like restaurants, shops, swimming pools, and modes of travel, such as buses and trains. However, by 1877, several states had enacted policies and procedures, known collectively as the Jim Crow laws, to restrict those rights.

Alonzo Fields treads carefully around the issue of race when speaking about his experiences working in the White House. In *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*, the playwright includes a brief retelling of an incident on the bus route to Washington. While taking a pause at a rest stop, Fields walks through the restaurant along with all of the other passengers to use the restroom. He has a hostile encounter with two white sailors, and on leaving the restroom he is scolded by a black employee for using the restroom, designated for white people only. Fields says it was “the first sign that I was in a different part of the country now.”

Once established in his new work place, Fields mentions the segregated dining rooms within the White House itself, a practice that only ended when the Roosevelts dismissed nearly all of their white servant staff. However, segregation of the servants remained in place in the Roosevelts Hyde Park residence, a fact that bristles Fields. Later in life, he spoke more candidly, saying:

We all worked together, but we couldn't eat together. ... Here in the White House, I'm working for the President. This is the home of the democracy of the world and I'm good enough to handle the President's food – to handle the President's food and do everything – but I cannot eat with the help.

It is worth noting that Jim Crow laws also severely curtailed African-Americans' access to voting, as well. For decades, obstacles like literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses discouraged newly freed black people, and their descendants, from easy access to the polls. They were so effective that in the Southern states, only 3% of African Americans were registered to vote in 1940. Registration itself was only half the battle, and no guarantee that casting your vote would go smoothly. Many black voters faced physical intimidation or violence at the polls. It is likely that many of the Fields himself and many of the African-Americans he worked alongside were not able to participate in the process of choosing the Presidents they served.

During Fields's lifetime, all African-Americans were granted full voting and public accommodation rights through the advances of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, integrating public schools, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which struck down segregation of public services.

Following these victories, the Voting Rights Act, signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, welcomed African-Americans into more active participation in our democratic process, and led to the registration of 250,000 black voters that same year. The Voting Rights Act was supported and renewed by later presidents Nixon, Ford, and finally, Reagan, who signed a 25-year extension of the VRA in 1982, protecting the right to vote for all citizens well into the 21st Century.

In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act. States across the country again enacted policies that restrict voting access for African-Americans and other marginalized communities through limitations on early voting and photo ID requirements, as well as the elimination of polling places in certain districts. These regressions have the potential to silence voices like Fields, limiting their participation and civic service to the country to which he devoted his life's work.