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NEWS

# Stekler: Voting restrictions will not stand

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Last month, four American presidents came to Austin to pay homage to Lyndon Baines Johnson, the last century's greatest civil rights president, and the landmark legislation that he helped pass. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were thunderbolts in their time, marking the end of a hundred post-Civil War years of failure to deal justly on the issue of race in our country. Fifty years later, voting rights is an issue again, and understanding how these bills passed when they did may help explain how our country has changed and how this issue may get resolved.

There are three ways of explaining why these bills passed when they did, the most obvious being pressure by civil rights movement activists forcing action by putting their lives at risk. Protesters looked for Southern locales where they were liable to be met with violence that could be televised and would enrage a non-Southern white audience into demanding action. The growth of television national news in the early '60s provided the forum. The police dogs and water hoses of Bull Connor in Birmingham in 1964 and the violence at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in 1965 provided the visuals that led to action by Congress.

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A second explanation is simply that the time had come. Greater visibility of blacks in popular culture and the integration of our armed forces were part of this. More importantly, the mass migration of Southern blacks north to cities like Chicago and Detroit changed national politics. Black votes became crucial in winning swing states in presidential elections. John F. Kennedy's well-publicized phone call to Martin Luther King's wife, Coretta, during the 1960 campaign, to help secure King's release from jail, affected enough black votes to win Illinois and the presidency that November.

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Lastly, change came because of leadership in the White House. Whether LBJ's "conversation" on civil rights came because of his own poor background, or his empathy for his Mexican-American students in Cotulla, or because of his own ambition, no president before or since knew how to pass legislation like he could.

Fifty years later, in spite of a 98-0 Senate vote to renew the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court gutted that bill's enforcement powers, fueling efforts in a number of states to pass new restrictions on voting. Many proposed new laws go beyond presenting an ID, by demanding proof of citizenship on election day, cutting back on polling places and early voting, and eliminating weekend voting. Everyone involved with passing these bills knows that they'll reduce turnout. And making voting more difficult has a disproportionate impact on lower income Americans.

Is a consensus, like the one that formed around civil rights in the '60s, possible today? How can we agree on what's factual when we often pick our news sources according to our politics? The consequences of niche politicking, along with gerrymandering and the triumph of the ideological extremes that dominate one-party districts and largely red or blue states, make forging bipartisan coalitions in Congress seem hopeless. Finally, President Barack Obama is not the second coming of LBJ. In fact, neither was Bill Clinton or either one of the Bushes.

American history, though, is a history of expanding rights, and societal change sometimes makes the seemingly impossible inevitable. Ask yourself how many older Americans could have imagined the legalization of same-sex marriage, or could conceive of the election of a black president in their lifetime.

In a country where demographic change will not be turned back, the electorate is going to change, voting restrictions or not, and making it more difficult to vote now may not be the best way to attract new people to your cause or your party. And whether by the rulings of a less ideological high court or by the rising tide of new voters, these restrictions will not stand.

A month before his death, an ailing Johnson drove himself seventy miles from his ranch to attend a civil rights symposium at his then new presidential museum. In his last public speech, he concluded: "We have proved that great progress is possible. We know how much still remains to be done. And if our efforts continue, if our will is strong and our hearts are right, I am confident we should overcome." Words that are still true today.

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