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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Voting Rights Act (1965) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_watchel_harry_h_1917_1997) | |
| On 6 August 1965 President [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_johnson_lyndon_baines_1908_1973/) signed the Voting Rights Act into law, calling the day ‘‘a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battleﬁeld’’ (Johnson, ‘‘Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda’’). The law came seven months after Martin Luther King launched a [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) (SCLC) campaign based in Selma, Alabama, with the aim of pressuring Congress to pass such legislation.   ‘‘In Selma,’’ King wrote, ‘‘we see a classic pattern of disenfranchisement typical of the Southern Black Belt areas where Negroes are in the majority’’ (King, ‘‘Selma— The Shame and the Promise’’). In addition to facing arbitrary literacy tests and poll taxes, African Americans in Selma and other southern towns were intimidated, harassed, and assaulted when they sought to register to vote. Civil rights activists met with ﬁerce resistance to their campaign, which attracted national attention on 7 March 1965, when civil rights workers were brutally attacked by white law enforcement ofﬁcers on a march from [Selma to Montgomery](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_selma_to_montgomery_march/).   Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act that same month, ‘‘with the outrage of Selma still fresh’’ (Johnson, ‘‘Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda’’). In just over four months, Congress passed the bill. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 abolished literacy tests and poll taxes designed to disenfranchise African American voters, and gave the federal government the authority to take over voter registration in counties with a pattern of persistent discrimination. ‘‘This law covers many pages,’’ Johnson said before signing the bill, ‘‘but the heart of the act is plain. Wherever, by clear and objective standards, States and counties are using regulations, or laws, or tests to deny the right to vote, then they will be struck down’’ (Johnson, ‘‘Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda’’).   On the same day Johnson signed the bill, he announced that his attorney general, [Nicholas Katzenbach](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_katzenbach_nicholas_debelleville_1922/), would initiate lawsuits against four states that still required a poll tax to register. Although King called the law ‘‘a great step forward in removing all of the remaining obstacles to the right to vote,’’ he knew that the ballot would only be an effective tool for social change if potential voters rid themselves of the fear associated with voting (King, 5 August 1965.) To meet this goal and ‘‘rid the American body politic of racism,’’ SCLC developed its Political Education and Voter Registration Department (King, ‘‘Annual Report’’).   **SOURCES**   Carson, *In Struggle*, 1981.  John Herbers, ‘‘Alabama Vote Drive Opened by Dr. King,’’ *New York Times*, 3 January 1965.  Johnson, ‘‘Remarks in the Capitol Rodunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act,’’ 6 August 1965, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson*, 1965, 1966.   E. W. Kenworthy, ‘‘Johnson Signs Voting Rights Bill, Orders Immediate Enforcement; 4 Suits Will Challenge Poll Tax,’’ *New York Times*, 7 August 1965.   King, ‘‘Annual Report Delivered at SCLC’s Ninth Annual National Convention, 11 August 1965,’’ MLKPP.  King, Press conference after meeting with Lyndon B. Johnson, 5 August 1965, MLKJP-GAMK.   King, ‘‘Selma—The Shame and the Promise,’’ IUD Agenda 1 (March 1965). ‘‘Provisions of Voting Bill,’’ *New York Times*, 7 August 1965. |