

Charles Bullock and Ronald Keith Gaddie. 2009. *The Triumph of Voting Rights in the South*. The University of Oklahoma Press.

The Triumph of Voting Rights In the South by Charles Bullock III from the University of Georgia and Keith Gaddie of the University of Oklahoma, is an examination of the success of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). The VRA is generally recognized as one of the nation's most successful civil rights statutes. The act itself codified and implemented the 15th Amendment's enduring guarantee that no person, regardless of race or color, shall be denied the right to vote. This book itself was part of an American Enterprise Institute's effort, started in 2006, to kill congressional reauthorization of the VRA, which they contend is so successful, it is no longer needed.

Bullock and Gaddie's book is organized to assess the progress in each of the 11 southern states in succession, starting with those that have been covered the longest by Section 5, those picked up by the 1975 amendments, and the two Southern states not subject to preclearance. Unfortunately, the book does not include Oklahoma, although the state's election laws have been alleged by some to contain similar discriminatory implications as those of the former states of the Confederacy.

In this state-by-state exploration of the success of the VRA in the South, minorities have been hugely empowered, especially by section 5

of the VRA, stating the need to have “preclearance” by the federal government before making any changes in their state’s election laws if their minority voting does not make a certain threshold. The Congress passed the VRA to counter state-level anti-minority laws that created disproportionate outcomes based on race, such as poll taxes, white primaries, and literacy tests.

The authors make the case that the original seven states under section 5 – Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina – have had the greatest increases in voting. When it comes to voting, for example, Mississippi had only 6.7 percent of the black population registered to vote in 1966. It now has 59.8 percent, which is still low compared to African-Americans nationwide registration rate of 65 percent. In terms of how this electoral empowerment translated into electing black leaders in Mississippi, the number of elected officials has escalated from a mere handful in the mid-1960s to more than 800 by 2001. Spectacular gains like these are similar, but less pronounced across the South. The author’s find that progress itself is rather uneven, but mainly evident where the VRA was enforced the longest.

The authors note flaws in the VRA. For example, they attribute the racial polarization of Southern electoral politics – with African-Americans monolithically supporting Democrats and whites monolithically supporting Republicans – as an unintended consequence of the VRA. In addition, though the VRA demanded creation of majority-minority districts back in the 1980s, the Department of Justice has reversed this trend because while African Americans have been elected in greater numbers, the two party system still keeps them and the Democratic Party in the South in a representative minority and will not gain proportionality to reflect the population at large because of extreme party polarization.

What is interesting, and what you will not find clearly stated in the book, is that Bullock represents the conservative American Enterprise Institute. Bullock, the Richard Russell Professor of Political Science, holds the professorship with the namesake of Sen. Richard Russell, who consistently opposed filibuster reform. Co-author Keith Gaddie actually served on a panel of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on October 7, 2005. The Commission convened a panel of voting rights experts on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC., according to the U.S.

Commission on Civil Rights Briefing Report, April 2006. Both argued that the VRA has been so successful, that it was obsolete and should be repealed. On the panel, Bullock said, “section 5 unfairly targets the South and Southwest, a distinction that is no longer warranted.” In essence, the book states the VRA is such a “triumph,” it is now no longer needed.

However, the VRA was reauthorized in 2006 for twenty-five years because of stories about towns such as Kilmichael, Mississippi. In Kilmichael, Bullock and Gaddie provide the recent example where the city council decided to cancel its election rather than allow African Americans, who were poised to be voted in for the first time in the city’s history, to win. It took two years before the Department of Justice stepped in, utilizing the VRA, forcing a vote. As a result, three African American council members were elected as well as one mayor. In addition, the House Committee that investigated the VRA in 2006 renewed it on the basis that they found that second generation discrimination has actually emerged. For example, Hispanics are often denied access to VRA-mandated language assistance in the South.

Despite the political gains made by African Americans in the South displayed in this well-written book, it does not appear to sustain the authors’ argument to allow the VRA to lapse. However, by 2031 a reexamination of African American and Hispanic gains in equal voting access in the South provide further evidence of the VRA’s enduring “triumph” in the context of eliminating the kinds of invidious discrimination it was intended to combat.

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