

# The Black Man And The Fifteenth Amendment

## The Republican Dilemma

Following the Civil War in 1865, Radical Republicans in Congress introduced a series of laws and constitutional amendments to try to secure civil and political rights for black people. This wing of the Republican party was called "radical" because of its strong stance on these and other issues. The right that provoked the greatest controversy, especially in the North, concerned black male suffrage: the right of the black man to vote.

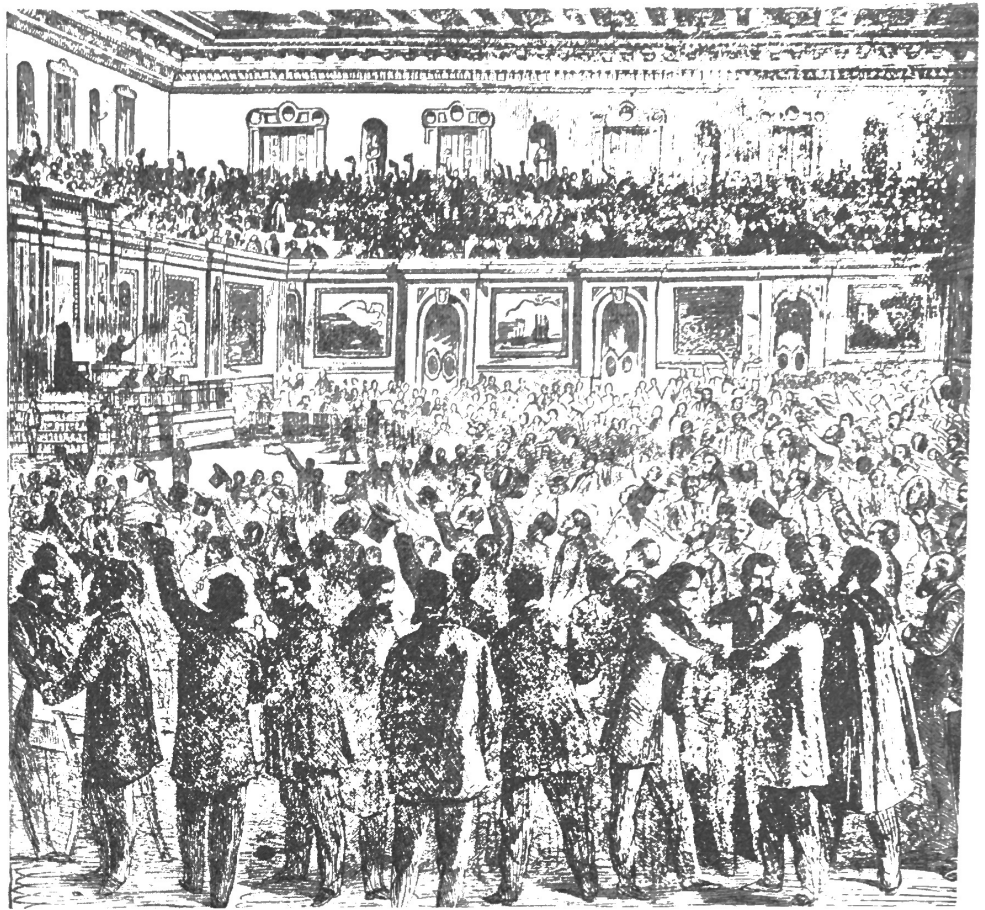
In 1867, Congress passed a law requiring the former Confederate states to include black male suffrage in their new state constitutions. Ironically, even though black men began voting in the South after 1867, the majority of northern states continued to deny black men this basic right.

In the North, the Republican's once-huge voter majority over the Democratic Party was declining. Radical Republican leaders feared that they might lose control of Congress to the Democrats.

One solution to this problem called for including the black man's vote in all northern states. Republicans assumed the new black voters would vote Republican just as their brothers were doing in the South. By increasing its membership to include all blacks from the North and South, the Republican party could then maintain its stronghold in Congress.

However, the Republicans faced an incredible dilemma. The idea of blacks voting was not popular in the North. In fact, several northern states had recently voted against black male suffrage. If the Republican Party openly supported the black man's right to vote, a significant number of white northern Republican voters might start supporting the Democrats who fiercely opposed this idea.

In May 1868, the Republicans held their presidential nominating convention



▲ Passage of the Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery.

in Chicago and chose Ulysses S. Grant as their candidate. The Republicans agreed that black male suffrage continued to be a requirement for the southern states, but for political reasons, decided that the northern states should settle this issue among themselves.

Grant was victorious in the election of 1868, but this once-popular general won by a surprisingly slim margin. It was clear to Republican leaders that if they were to remain in power, their party needed the votes of black men in the North.

## The Fifteenth Amendment

When the new year began in 1869, the Republicans were ready to introduce a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the black man's right to vote. The Republicans were determined to secure the black Republican vote in the North and to keep the blacks voting Republican in the South.

For two months, Congress considered the proposed amendment. Several versions of the amendment were submitted, debated, rejected and then reconsidered in both the House and Senate. In one version, introduced by the Radical Republicans, the

amendment specifically granted the right to vote and hold office to "citizens of the United States of African descent." The Radicals also attempted to include provisions in the amendment that would have barred voting taxes, literacy tests and restrictions on blacks running for public office. However, the Radicals no longer dominated Congress as they once did. Their proposals were voted down.

An even broader proposal would have prohibited discrimination in voting or holding office because of race, color, nationality, ownership of property, education or religious belief. Because this proposal would have prevented the states from making up their own voter qualifications, Congress voted against it. For example, some eastern states had already limited the Irish vote with special property requirements, and California was just as determined to prevent the Chinese immigrants from voting.

Finally, at the end of February 1869, Congress approved a compromise amendment that said nothing about voter qualifications or the right to run for public office. It did not even specifically mention the black man:

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**Section 1:** The right of citizens of the United States vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

**Section 2:** The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

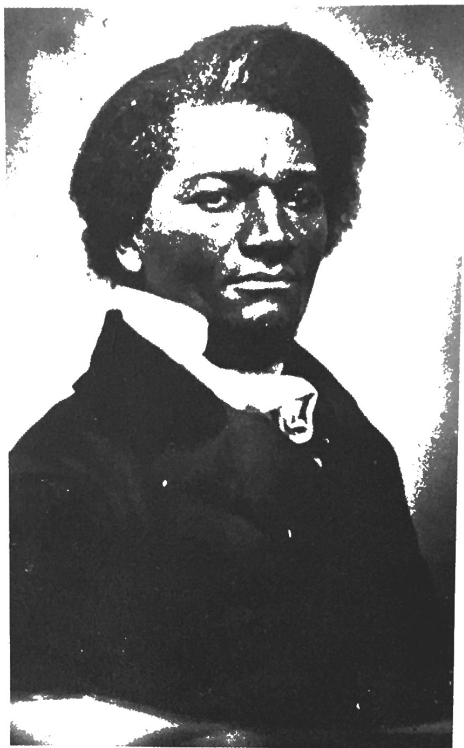
Once approved by the required two-thirds majorities in the House and Senate, the Fifteenth Amendment had to be ratified by 28, or three-fourths, of the states. Due to the reconstruction laws, black male suffrage already existed in 11 southern states. Since almost all of these states were controlled by Republican reconstruction governments, they could be counted on to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment. Supporters of the Fifteenth Amendment needed only 17 of the remaining 26 northern and western states in order to succeed. At this time, just nine of these states allowed the black man to vote. The struggle for and against ratification hung on what blacks and other political interests would do.

### The Blacks

Only days after General Lee surrendered at Appomatox in April, 1865, black abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In his speech, Douglass explained why the black man wanted the right to vote "in every state of the Union":

It is said that we are ignorant; I admit it. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the Negro knows enough to pay taxes to support government, he knows enough to vote; taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag for the government, he knows enough to vote. . . . What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply *justice*.

While Congress debated the Fifteenth Amendment early in 1869, 150 black men from 17 states assembled for a convention in Washington, D.C. This was the first national meeting of black Americans in the history of the United States. Frederick Douglass was elected president of the convention.



▲ Abolitionist Frederick Douglass. (UPI/Bettman Newsphotos.)

The delegates praised the Republicans in Congress for passing the reconstruction laws and congratulated General Grant on his election to the White House. They also pledged their continued support of the Republican Party.

Those attending the convention also spent time meeting with members of Congress, encouraging them to pass a strong amendment guaranteeing black male suffrage nationwide. When the meeting adjourned, the delegates were confident that a new era of democracy for the black man was about to begin.

### The Abolitionists

The abolitionists (those who opposed slavery) achieved their original goal when in 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery. Abolitionists remained active, working for radical reconstruction policies and black rights. Most abolitionists supported the Fifteenth Amendment even though they felt it did not go far enough in protecting the black voter.

Wendell Phillips, one of the early anti-slavery leaders, said the amendment would provide "opportunity, education, fair play, right to office and elbow room" for the black man. At the American Anti-Slavery Convention in May 1869, the

abolitionists approved a resolution calling the Fifteenth Amendment "the capstone and completion of our movement; the fulfillment of our pledge to the Negro race."

### The Women Suffragists

Before the Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony organized a movement for women's rights including female suffrage. But, at this time, they both agreed that ending slavery was the first priority for the nation's reformers.

After the war, Stanton and Anthony expected women to receive the vote with black men, but this did not happen. In 1867, Horace Greeley, a publisher of the *New York Tribune* and a Republican Party leader, advised the women suffrage leaders to wait for the vote. In his words, this was "the Negro's hour."

At the American Equal Rights Association Convention in 1869, Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony refused to support the Fifteenth Amendment because it did not include women. At the same convention, Frederick Douglass argued that securing the right to vote was more urgent for the black man than for women. Stanton and Anthony remained unconvinced that women should once again sit back and wait. They soon withdrew from the association and immediately formed a new organization to work exclusively for female suffrage.

### The Democrats

The Democrats realized they were fighting for political survival. They feared ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment would automatically create some 170,000 loyal black Republican voters in the North and West. This could destroy the Democrats' chance for political control.

Democrats debated against the ratification by claiming that the Fifteenth Amendment restricted the states' rights to run their own elections. The Democrats also charged the Republicans with breaking their promise of allowing the states, outside the South, to decide for themselves whether to grant black male suffrage. Democrat leaders cited the low level of literacy in the black population and they predicted black voters would be easily swayed by false promises and outright bribery.

## Victory, Then Tragedy

Despite Democratic opposition, the Republicans steadily won ratification victories throughout 1869. Ironically, it was a southern state, Georgia, that clinched the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment on February 2, 1870.

On March 30, President Grant officially proclaimed the Fifteenth Amendment as part of the Constitution. Washington and many other American cities celebrated. Over 10,000 blacks paraded through Baltimore. In a speech on May 5, 1870, Frederick Douglass rejoiced, "What a country—fortunate in its institutions, in its Fifteenth Amendment, in its future."

The jubilation over victory did not last long. While Republicans acquired loyal black voters in the North, the South was an entirely different matter. The Ku Klux Klan and other violent racist groups intimidated black men who tried to vote, or who had voted,



▲ The Ku Klux Klan intimidated black voters and then white supporters. (The Bettman Archive.)

by burning their homes, churches and schools, even by resorting to murder. National politics also prevented the black man from exercising political power.

When the election for president in 1876 ended with a dispute over electoral votes, the Republicans made a deal with the southern Democrats. First, the southerners agreed to support Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes for president. In turn, the Republicans promised to withdraw troops from the South and abandon federal enforcement of black's rights, including the right to vote. Because of this agreement, intimidation of black voters would continue.

Within a few years the southern state governments required blacks to pay voting taxes, pass literacy tests and endure many other unfair restrictions on their right to vote. In Mississippi, 67 percent of the black adult men were registered to vote in 1867; by 1892 only 4 percent were registered. The political deal to secure Hayes as president rendered the Fifteenth Amendment meaningless. Another 75 years passed before black voting rights were again enforced in the South. □

### For Discussion and Writing

1. What was the "Republican dilemma" in 1868?
2. During the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, women suffrage leaders were told that it was "the Negro's hour." What did this mean? How did Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony respond to this argument? Do you think they did the right thing? Why or why not?

### For Further Reading

Foner, Philip S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: The Citadel Press, 1964.

Gillette, William. *The Right To Vote: Politics and Passage of the Fifteenth Amendment*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1965.

## A C T I V I T Y

In this activity you will have a chance to re-create history by going back to the year 1868 to participate in a voting rights convention. You will be assigned to a group that had a particular viewpoint on voting rights in 1868. Your group and four others at the convention will write a voting rights amendment to recommend to Congress. In this way, your class will have the opportunity to improve upon the original Fifteenth Amendment that was passed by Congress early in 1869. For the purposes of this activity, it does not matter what your own sex or race is when you are assigned to one of the convention groups listed below.