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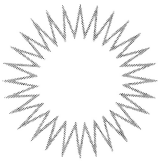
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Republicans and Race

The GOP's Frayed Relationship with
African Americans, 1945–1974

Timothy N. Thurber



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Introduction

Three weeks before he was officially nominated as the Republican presidential candidate in 2000, George W. Bush addressed the annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Knowing he faced a hostile audience (in 1983 its delegates had booed and hissed when his father insisted that Republican policies benefited African Americans), Bush sought to disarm the crowd with humor, quipping that he had “a couple, maybe more than a couple” supporters among them. He then turned more serious and confessed that the “party of [Abraham] Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln.” But, the Texan insisted, the future could be different. He agreed that racism remained a serious national problem, pledged to vigorously enforce civil rights laws, and called for education reform, greater health care access, more home ownership, and help for religious organizations that assisted “the suffering and hurting.” A deeply religious man, Bush affirmed that the state should help the destitute but also insisted that such people “need[ed] what no government can provide, the power of compassion and prayer and love.” Audience members remained leery. One, who had not voted for a Republican presidential candidate in nearly half a century, deemed Bush’s ideas “a step in the right direction” but then observed, “Face it, they haven’t done anything for us.”¹

In contrast, the NAACP delegates warmly welcomed Bush’s Democratic opponent, Vice President Albert Gore Jr., three days later. They cheered when Gore proclaimed himself a member of their organization and reeled off a list of federal policy prescriptions that included supporting affirmative action, protecting Social Security and Medicare from budget cuts, curbing racial profiling by law enforcement officers, and fostering economic development. Gore contrasted his religious views with Bush’s by declaring that a person expresses faith through action,

not rhetoric. Results, he argued, matter more than good intentions. The NAACP delegates' divergent responses to the two candidates foreshadowed Bush's winning a paltry 9 percent of the black vote in the November election.²

That 91 percent of black voters cast their ballots for Gore is evidence that nothing separates the American electorate more than race. Black loyalty to the Democratic Party remains high across age, class, gender, national origin, and other demographic characteristics. Republican voters, in contrast, are overwhelmingly white. Since 1964, no Republican presidential candidate has attracted more than 15 percent of the black vote.³

Two narratives dominate contemporary discussions of African Americans and the Republican Party. One stresses that during the mid-1960s and early 1970s, Republicans consciously abandoned their identity as the pro-civil rights "party of Lincoln" to woo whites, especially in the South, who were eager to preserve their political, economic, and social power in the face of challenges from the civil rights movement and federal authorities. In this view, race has played a decisive role in the nation's conservative turn since the late 1960s. A second interpretation, usually offered by Republicans themselves or by conservative activists, denies any transformation. Proponents of this view uphold the GOP as fighting to desegregate the South and protect black voting rights. They contend it was the Democratic Party that stood in the way of racial progress during the mid-twentieth century and continues to offer policies that harm black families and communities.⁴

I offer a fresh look at the relationship between African Americans and the GOP. This book explores how Republicans at the federal level approached racial policy and politics between 1945 and 1974. Though the struggle for black equality existed before then and continues today, these three decades constitute a distinct era in that battle. African Americans and their allies grew more assertive in challenging the status quo. Some focused on direct action protests, while others primarily lobbied the federal government. Civil rights reformers demanded changes in economics, segregation, voting, housing, and other matters. Their struggle encompassed the entire nation, not just the South. The most prominent and influential reformers focused on removing racial distinctions from the law—they fought for a "color-blind" society.

The mid-1970s marked another turning point. Important legal victories had been achieved. Direct action subsided, as did the large-scale racial violence that had been so common in the second half of the 1960s. Controversies over whether the federal government would force the integration of suburban and urban schools and launch a massive new anti-poverty initiative receded. Most important, civil rights activists now championed “race-conscious” remedies for inequality. Though such thinking had been present in the earlier period, it took a backseat to universalist ideas that emphasized a common humanity. Celebrations of “diversity” began to supplant the “color-blind” model.⁵

Between 1945 and 1974, Republicans exerted considerable influence over the timing and content of racial policy. The GOP’s impact was evident at the White House, where Dwight Eisenhower and later Richard Nixon made important decisions. It was also at work in Congress. By focusing heavily on Congress, I aim to bring greater balance to a narrative that has placed presidents and presidential contenders at center stage.

Republicans’ involvement differed from that portrayed by the two dominant narratives. They were not steadfast supporters of civil rights reforms prior to 1964. To be sure, Republicans did not speak with one voice, and at crucial moments they aligned with the NAACP and other prominent black leaders. More often than not, however, they were at loggerheads. Most Republicans opposed the reformers’ agenda or were uninterested in race altogether. They usually saw little political advantage in pressing for change. Their understanding of race, the role of the state, and American society was fundamentally different from that of most African Americans. Like their nineteenth-century forebears, Republicans proved effective at minimizing the reach of federal authority into racial matters outside the South—or preventing it altogether. The reforms they did support applied almost exclusively to Dixie.

Scholars who emphasize a sharp turn to the right after 1964 ignore or trivialize significant policy developments. During the early 1970s, civil rights activists felt embattled and dejected. Their differences with the GOP remained substantial, and policy clashes were frequently acrimonious. Nevertheless, Republicans, especially those in the Senate, proved crucial to fending off attempts by conservatives (usually southerners) in

both parties to roll back reforms regarding education, voting, and employment. The Nixon administration launched several notable initiatives. Republicans supported measures their predecessors had rejected or never would have favored. The reform impulse of the 1960s survived and was expanded on. The GOP adapted to a racial context different from that which had existed in earlier decades. The early 1970s offer an important reminder that shifts in party control of the White House do not necessarily mean policy changes and that developments in Congress matter as much as, if not more than, presidential politics.

I also explore the role race played in Republican politics. The GOP remained the minority party throughout the period covered in this book. During the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats built a coalition of white southerners, factory workers outside the South, intellectuals, and African Americans. These diverse groups often quarreled, but their loyalty on Election Day meant that Democrats controlled both houses of Congress for almost the entire era covered in this book and held the White House for much of it. The GOP thus had to find new voters if it wanted to regain the dominance it had enjoyed before the New Deal.

For thirty years, race played a prominent role in intraparty debates over how to do that. Some Republicans favored allying more closely with the civil rights movement as a means of rallying support from whites and blacks alike. Others considered that approach futile if not counterproductive. The latter faction usually prevailed. Liberal Republicans were small in number and wielded minimal influence over the party's direction. The GOP usually paid little or no political price for—and indeed, benefited from—its lack of African American supporters. Between 1945 and 1974, civil rights leaders' recurring claims that blacks constituted the “balance of power” on Election Day often proved greatly exaggerated.

This book is about men who held or sought power and how they dealt with racial issues from those positions of influence. It speaks to two important topics in post-World War II American history: the struggle for racial justice, and the development of the Republican Party. The Republican Party shaped the modern African American freedom struggle. That fight also transformed the GOP.

Fair Employment Practices Commission, Voting Rights, and Racial Violence

On February 4, 1945, U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, British prime minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet general secretary Joseph Stalin convened in Yalta. With victory against Germany and Italy imminent, they had gathered to make plans for the political and economic future of Europe.¹

The degree to which government would shape the postwar order stood at the center of domestic politics too. Roosevelt's New Deal had expanded federal authority over economic activities. Though many Americans despised the president, millions adored him and believed the New Deal had created a more just society. African Americans were among the latter. The New Deal reinforced and expanded racial discrimination, but it also brought jobs, education, improvements in health, and attention from prominent members of the administration. African Americans saw the federal government as a positive force.

As blacks looked ahead to the postwar era, they believed further assistance from Washington would be necessary for economic opportunities, voting rights, and protection from violence. They would be sorely disappointed. Southern Democrats, who wielded considerable power in Congress, continued to block federal efforts for racial change. So, too, did Republicans, who viewed the world very differently from African Americans and felt no compelling reason to woo black voters.

The Battle for Fair Employment Legislation

The day after Roosevelt arrived in Yalta, Senator Robert Taft (R-Ohio) introduced a bill to create a federal fair employment practices commission (FEPC). This five-member body would investigate individual complaints of job discrimination, establish regional committees, undertake studies, and work with employers and labor unions to ensure that race, ethnicity, and religion would not be factors in hiring, firing, compensation, and other decisions. The commission would have no enforcement powers; it would rely on persuasion and negotiation. In the parlance of the day, it was known as a “voluntary” commission. Because discrimination might well function differently in various parts of the country, Taft argued, solutions should vary accordingly. The first step was to study those regional differences.²

Taft’s words and actions commanded attention. The son of former president William Howard Taft, he had graduated first in his class at Yale and then at Harvard Law School. He had been elected to the Senate in 1938 and quickly became the leader of the conservative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans, formed in opposition to the New Deal. As far as Taft was concerned, the United States was already well down the road to socialism. Government officials were exerting influence over wages, prices, and other matters that should be reserved for business executives and markets.³

The senator found the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) particularly troublesome. Created in 1935, the NLRB had the authority to protect workers’ right to join unions and thereby engage in collective bargaining with employers. It helped facilitate a dramatic rise in union membership. By the mid-1940s, unions had negotiated wages, benefits, and work rules that previous generations of laborers and managers would have found unimaginable. Most union members saw the federal government as their ally and credited the Democrats for these gains. Most business leaders, in contrast, detested the NLRB and unions. They wanted to set the terms of employment, and they believed that unions encouraged workers to see their bosses as greedy adversaries rather than benevolent allies. In management’s eyes, class conflict had, with government assistance, replaced the harmonious labor relations of earlier eras.

Business leaders wanted to hold labor's power in check or roll it back to pre-New Deal levels.⁴

Given Taft's opposition to federal involvement in labor affairs, his sponsorship of FEPC legislation appeared to be a contradiction, but the senator thought otherwise. "In many places, [African Americans] are the last to be employed and the first to be laid off," he acknowledged. "Custom and prejudice interfere with improvement in their position." Taft believed discrimination constituted an artificial barrier that could keep an individual from making the most of his or her abilities.⁵

Taft's bill reflected recent trends. World War II had made race a prominent issue in public discussion and popular culture. American propaganda countered Nazi theories of white supremacy by highlighting themes such as democracy, equality, and opportunity. Universalist ideas, which aimed to replace a belief in racial hierarchy with a standard of law and custom that emphasized a common humanity, had gained strength. Taft's committee resembled the many state and local agencies created during the war to foster harmonious intergroup relations. These bodies typically appealed to conscience and morality while arguing that prejudice was un-American. Several states in the North and West were even considering some sort of antidiscrimination employment policy. Finally, Taft's legislation grew out of developments in management. Many corporations continued to refuse to hire blacks and other minorities or relegated them to the least desirable, lowest-paying work; they often justified their actions by citing concerns that white employees might engage in violence or other work disruptions rather than accept black coworkers. Yet business executives were not monolithic. Wartime rhetoric, as well as labor shortages and pressure from civil rights activists, had led some to seek expanded opportunities for African Americans. Business leaders wanted to control this process.⁶

Taft hoped to preserve that autonomy by heading off "compulsory" FEPC legislation. Although voluntary and compulsory FEPC models shared several characteristics, they differed regarding enforcement. If a compulsory FEPC found evidence of discrimination, it could, like the NLRB, issue a cease-and-desist order enforceable by a federal court, thus compelling businesses and unions to change their behavior. Penalties for noncompliance might include fines or the mandatory hiring or

promotion of the individual who had filed the complaint (perhaps with back pay), or some other affirmative step.

Compulsory FEPC advocates distinguished between prejudice and discrimination. Government could not force an individual to hold particular beliefs (prejudice), but it could, through the threat of punishment, prevent him or her from acting on those beliefs (discrimination). According to Congresswoman Mary Norton (D-N.J.), a sponsor of compulsory FEPC legislation, intent to discriminate was evident in union contracts, job advertisements in newspapers (which often expressed a preference for “white” or “colored” workers), and payroll records. Norton also believed discrimination could be proved through “an employer’s pattern of rejections or statements made by personnel officers.”⁷

The drive for a compulsory FEPC had begun in 1943 with the creation of the National Council for a Permanent FEPC. It consisted of unions, civil rights groups, and liberal religious organizations (primarily Jewish and Catholic) that supported the New Deal. Left-wing groups, such as the Socialist and Communist Parties, also favored a compulsory FEPC. Few Republicans or conservative organizations were involved, although Senator Arthur Capper (R-Kans.) was an honorary cochair with Senator Robert Wagner (D-N.Y.), a longtime labor ally. The council wished to make permanent the temporary FEPC created in 1941 by Roosevelt’s executive order. The wartime FEPC had inspired civil rights reformers to question the status quo and look to federal authority for assistance, but it opened few jobs for African Americans.⁸

Reformers believed results would be different under a permanent, compulsory FEPC. Decades of moral suasion had been found wanting, according to A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (an African American union). Randolph believed that employers mouthed pious phrases about opportunity but then failed to act. For him, protest and pressure mattered more than talk. Recent employment gains among African Americans had come largely from the enormous demand for wartime labor, and reformers feared blacks would suffer extensive postwar job losses, as they had after World War I. A compulsory FEPC would minimize layoffs or ensure that they were made without regard to race.⁹

Reformers also regarded a compulsory FEPC as part of a larger strug-

gle in which government would intervene in the employer-worker relationship to provide greater protections and wealth for labor. FEPC proponents drew inspiration from Roosevelt's 1941 "Four Freedoms" speech, which included "freedom from want" as a basic right for all citizens. Freedom, they believed, had a material component. This contrasted sharply with Taft's definition of freedom as the ability to live with minimal government regulation.¹⁰

Taft had other differences with compulsory FEPC advocates. The senator was convinced that few people understood the radical implications of a compulsory FEPC. The agency would be "bound by no rules of evidence," he claimed, thus allowing government to run roughshod over business. Whereas compulsory FEPC proponents insisted that discrimination was relatively easy to discern, Taft found it a nebulous concept, especially in a legal setting. How did one prove that an employment decision was based on discrimination rather than on a job candidate's qualifications or the lack thereof? Noting that anyone who failed to get a job or a promotion could claim to be a victim of discrimination, Taft feared there would be "thousands of lawsuits" against employers. He postulated that an employer could avoid these "harassing suits" only by "[choosing] his employees approximately in proportion to the division of races and religions in his district." Warning that "race and religion will enter into every decision," the senator foresaw a world in which "Catholic institutions . . . will have to employ Protestants" and "white waiters and porters could insist upon most of the work in the Pullman sleepers and dining cars." Taft believed that mixing people who did not want to be mixed would lead to "more bad racial and religious feeling" and would "do the colored race more harm than good."¹¹

The senator was especially worried that federal efforts would provoke violence. "You can pass some legislation, but if you go forward too quickly, reaction will set in," he had told the *Afro-American* (a black newspaper chain) in May 1944. "When you pass some laws you are liable to run into race riots." Taft saw prejudice as a fundamental part of human nature that had "existed from the beginning of time" and would "likely continue to exist." Change was not impossible, but it required a soft approach and would come slowly.¹²

Taft was undoubtedly referring to the considerable racial conflict that

had occurred in both the North and the South. Most whites wanted to keep African Americans out of their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Riots had broken out in Harlem and Detroit, but smaller racial clashes also occurred. In March 1943, 2,000 women at a rubber plant in Detroit walked off the job to protest plans for integrated bathrooms. Two months later, white dockworkers in Mobile, Alabama, attacked blacks after hearing that twelve of them would be promoted to welders; the melee occurred even though the African Americans would be kept segregated.¹³

A year later, 8,000 white workers at the Philadelphia Transit Company brought public transportation to a halt when they went on strike to protest management's decision—made under pressure from the FEPC and other federal agencies—to hire eight blacks as motormen and conductors. Claiming *they* were being discriminated against, whites saw federal intervention on behalf of blacks as a threat to their job security. White and black leaders in Philadelphia worked feverishly to avoid violence; there were a few incidents, but no widespread rioting. Alarmed that war production at the city's factories was suffering, federal officials brought in troops to run the streetcars, trolleys, and buses. The union went back to work after five days. This and other "hate strikes," which occurred in Detroit, Portland, and elsewhere, were the latest incidents in a long history of workplace conflict between blue-collar whites and blacks outside the South.¹⁴

Taft's 1945 proposal meant that a compulsory FEPC had no chance of being enacted. Reformers had hoped to build a coalition of Republicans and nonsouthern Democrats, but GOP support was now unlikely. Senate convention held that legislators followed their leaders' wishes. A lawmaker won a pork-barrel project, gained a seat on a desired committee, or rallied votes for a piece of legislation by toeing the party line. Mavericks found themselves ostracized; they could deliver speeches but little else for their constituents.¹⁵

Activists were angry with Taft for other reasons. They believed bold government action would reduce racial tension and prevent violence. Members of the Cincinnati branch of the NAACP charged the senator with betraying earlier positions as well as the GOP's 1944 platform pledge; Taft vigorously denied both allegations. The senator's warning

about proportional hiring, they protested, was not only factually incorrect but also “a deliberate attempt to incite misinformed opposition.” Discussion of fair employment practices as a zero-sum game in which blacks gained jobs at whites’ expense had to be squashed.¹⁶

Reformers were especially troubled by Taft’s comments, offered to civil rights representatives during a private meeting on February 2, that blacks should be pleased with their progress and should not demand jobs where they were not wanted. Accusing him of “temporizing and indulging prejudice,” they pointedly asked him in a follow-up letter, “Did it ever occur to you that all Negroes are not satisfied with being porters and waiters, and that some might desire to be train engineers, but for racial discrimination, which bars them?” Roy Wilkins, editor of the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*, suspected that Taft did not understand the extent of discrimination. He told the senator that study of the issue was “far behind the times because all Negroes, even illiterate ones, are cognizant that discrimination exists” and believe “persuasion is of no avail.” Enforcement powers were essential, Wilkins added, because African Americans had neither the time nor the money to file private lawsuits and wait for the courts to act.¹⁷

The NAACP put the onus for change squarely on the GOP. “The hatchet is out and it is not in the hands of [southern Democrats] . . . but in the aristocratic fingers of the distinguished senator from Ohio,” *The Crisis* editorialized. Unless the GOP backed a compulsory FEPC, “Negroes cannot do other than consider the Republicans unfriendly to their basic necessity of earning a living.” The NAACP was officially nonpartisan, although its leaders had established close ties with several nonsouthern Democrats in the 1930s. Taft’s relationship with the national organization was chilly at best; in 1944 he had denounced “the NAACP Communists” who had “sold themselves to the New Deal.”¹⁸

Few Republicans proved willing to support an FEPC. GOP members of the House Rules Committee cooperated with southern Democrats to block Norton’s compulsory FEPC bill. Nearly all legislation in the House required approval from the committee to be eligible for debate by the full body. Norton filed a discharge petition in April, but by December, just 50 of the 190 House Republicans had signed it. The petition remained roughly 50 signatures short of the 218 needed to pry the bill

from the committee. Republicans in both the House and the Senate, meanwhile, allied with southern Democrats to pass legislation that ended funding for the wartime FEPC beyond June 30, 1946.¹⁹

Southern Democrats launched a filibuster when a compulsory FEPC measure came up in the Senate in February 1946, bringing the upper house to a standstill. The filibuster and the reaction to it represented a test of lawmakers' determination to pass or defeat a bill. Two options existed for ending a filibuster. Leaders could try to wear out participants by keeping the Senate in session around the clock, but members of both parties considered this taboo because so many legislators were quite elderly. The other alternative was cloture, by which two-thirds of those present and voting could halt the debate. The Senate had adopted cloture in just four of the twenty-one attempts since Rule XXII, the filibuster rule, had been implemented in 1917; it had never been achieved on a civil rights bill. Cloture failed this time, too—by eight votes. Although twenty-five Republicans voted for cloture, eight opposed it, and five did not vote.²⁰

A vote for cloture was not a vote for a compulsory FEPC. A senator could favor ending the debate but then vote against the bill itself. Wilkins accused both parties of timidity. "The record made by the Republicans is nothing about which the party can boast," he wrote to Republican National Committee (RNC) chair Herbert Brownell Jr. *The Crisis* insisted the compulsory measure would have passed if the White House and congressional Republicans had wanted it.²¹

Battles over an FEPC occurred regularly over the next several years. Several northern Democrats pushed for a compulsory body, and Harry Truman, who became president when Roosevelt died in April 1945, offered rhetorical support. Though Truman privately harbored racist views, he believed in equal opportunity, was sincerely troubled by violence against African Americans, and recognized that blacks constituted a core Democratic constituency. The president did little to prod congressional Democrats to act, however.²²

Since the days of slavery, southern Democrats had fought diligently to keep federal authority out of the region's labor market. They had blunted the impact of New Deal labor and social welfare legislation, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Social Security Act, by demanding provisions that limited the laws' applicability to blacks or excluded them

altogether. Eager to preserve their region's low-wage, racially hierarchical labor structure, southern Democrats filled the *Congressional Record* with sharp denunciations of an FEPC.²³

Republicans spoke far less frequently, but what they said revealed important beliefs about race and American society. A few Republicans endorsed a compulsory FEPC. Senator Wayne Morse (R-Ore.) had seen discrimination firsthand while serving on the War Labor Board during the early 1940s. Born in Wisconsin, Morse stood squarely in the tradition of Robert La Follette, the state's early-twentieth-century progressive Republican governor and senator. Morse displayed a fierce independence throughout his career. During the 1946 filibuster, he urged Senate leaders to demand around-the-clock sessions. Soon after cloture failed, he publicly condemned the "legislative tyranny of a willful minority." Out of step with most of his GOP colleagues on labor, race, and several other issues, Morse became a Democrat in the mid-1950s.²⁴

Irving Ives of New York was another Republican champion of a compulsory FEPC. Before being elected to the Senate in 1946, he had been chair of the New York Temporary Commission against Discrimination and had led the successful struggle in 1945 for a compulsory FEPC in the Empire State. A former insurance and banking executive, Ives was the founding dean of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. He personified a new perspective in management theory—one that was less hostile toward government and looked to promote more harmonious labor-management relations. "The right to earn a living regardless of one's race or religion or national origin or ancestry is inherent in our American Creed," he proclaimed. Ives's language reflected the influence of Gunnar Myrdal's famous 1944 book *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal posited that the gap between the nation's ideals of freedom and opportunity and the realities of racial oppression could be overcome, primarily through enlightened leadership from elites. Throughout his twelve-year Senate career, Ives regularly worked with liberal Democrats, most notably Senator Hubert Humphrey (Minn.), on the FEPC and other civil rights matters.²⁵

Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.) also advocated a compulsory FEPC. Elected to the House in 1946, he served three terms. After a brief stint as attorney general of the Empire State, he was elected to the Senate in 1956 and re-

mained there until 1981. A Jew who strongly believed that government could help the less fortunate, Javits might well have been a Democrat. However, he saw the Democrats as a southern-based party that oppressed blacks, favored the prohibition of alcohol, and was hostile to immigrants; the latter two positions were decidedly unpopular on the Lower East Side of New York City, where Javits grew up. The rampant corruption in the city's Tammany Hall political machine, which Democrats controlled, also pushed Javits into the GOP.²⁶

The New York FEPC stood as a source of pride for proponents of a compulsory federal FEPC. In 1947 Ives proclaimed it a success because none of the 752 allegations of discrimination it had investigated in the past year had wound up in court; all had been either settled amicably through negotiation or dismissed. For Ives, this was powerful evidence that claims that an FEPC would foster discord were erroneous. Over the next three decades, liberals in both parties would similarly portray the North as making racial progress through enlightened public policy.²⁷

Whereas Taft and other critics of a compulsory FEPC regarded Nazi Germany as a dramatic reminder of the dangers of a powerful state, advocates drew different lessons from the war. According to Senator H. Alexander Smith (R-N.J.), blacks had proved themselves in the military and deserved equal opportunities in the postwar era. Noting Hitler's theories of white supremacy, he asked, "Shall we find that while we have conquered this false ideology by force of arms, we have ourselves been overcome by this same false thinking?" The United States could win the allegiance of nonwhites, who made up two-thirds of the world's population, by promoting equal opportunity and living up to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Smith saw these issues in terms of American exceptionalism. "Is not equality of opportunity the eternal truth that America, the New World, has given to the Old World?" he asked. Racial or ethnic hatred, and the violence that might result, took on new meaning in a world where atom bombs existed. "We have come to a new age of human history," Smith announced, "where tolerance and the goal of human understanding must be our objective if the human race is to survive."²⁸

These were minority views, advocated by only a handful of lawmakers who stood on the margins of power within the GOP and Congress. Most Republicans wanted no FEPC whatsoever. Some regarded it as an

overwrought response to a minor or even nonexistent problem. Insisting that he had long worked for black advancement in his community, Senator Albert Hawkes (N.J.) announced that during his seventeen years as president of a chemical company, racial friction had never been a serious matter in his plants. Senator Alexander Wiley (Wis.), who had served as district attorney in a small town with few African American residents, proclaimed his own racial innocence and that of his constituents. "I come from a state," he proudly declared, "where there has been little or no prejudice." Staunch New Deal critic Clare Hoffman (Mich.) noted, "I have seen so little discrimination in my community that it is difficult for me to realize that some of the statements made by advocates of this sort of legislation are factual."²⁹

Republicans believed government intervention was not needed and might make racial problems worse. In their view, employers were benevolent figures who would immediately correct inequities once they became aware of them. Hawkes recalled that when he discovered that some black workers were making ten cents an hour less than whites, despite performing at the same level, he met with supervisors to equalize pay rates. "That shows what can be done by education and being on the ground," he affirmed. Like Taft, Hawkes considered a compulsory FEPC a form of social engineering that was destined to fail. "Neither you nor I can make things move any faster than the human family can absorb them," he maintained. The rapid influx of large numbers of black employees would, he feared, spark white violence. "No employer," he declared, "had the power to put into a plant a given number of people who were distasteful to those in the plant, and make them all get along together."³⁰

Viewing an FEPC through the lens of the New Deal, Republicans crafted a historical narrative that emphasized a steady loss of employers' freedom. Senator Wallace White (Maine) worried that federal power had to be checked "if our America is to be saved." "If this bill were enacted into law, it would be another nail in the coffin of free enterprise," Hawkes lamented. "We have already put many nails in the coffin in preparing it for the burial of free enterprise. The patient is not yet dead, but he is extremely sick and all that is needed to finish him is a few more doctors." Business leaders, Hawkes reported, were "very weary and

tired” after a decade of government regulation of wages and prices and higher taxes; further regulation would leave the United States a “second-rate nation.” A compulsory FEPC would establish “an army of examiners . . . to harass and badger busy men to such a degree as to prevent the successful operation of their businesses.”³¹

Wiley similarly described an FEPC as “a dangerous instrument for statism.” Citing the hundreds of letters he had received from business leaders denouncing the Office of Price Administration, a wartime agency that had controlled prices and rationed many products, Wiley inquired, “Shall we create a government Gestapo which will make life perfectly miserable for the men who produce and create and build?” For Wiley, business, not government, drove progress. The senator forecast that the FEPC would, like the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, become a vehicle by which self-serving government officials dispensed unproductive jobs in return for votes.³²

FEPC opponents drew another parallel with the 1930s. The NLRB, critics routinely charged, was neutral only in theory. Through their Democratic allies in government, unions had seized control of a federal regulatory body and used it to further their own narrow ends. Management carried no weight with NLRB officials. A compulsory FEPC would, Hoffman protested, empower “professional reformers” who would “exercise their professional talents as creators of unrest.” It would lead to “punishment imposed by some bureaucrat, by some partisan, by some crackpot.” According to Congressman Charles Halleck (Ind.), a compulsory FEPC would be “judge, jury, as well as investigator.”³³

Republican critics insisted that a compulsory FEPC would inevitably lead to a racial spoils system. This was not a new controversy. Some civil rights activists during the 1930s had called for racial proportionalism in employment. Courts wrestling with the dilemma of how to prove discrimination considered the issue, and some New Deal agencies had adopted numerical targets for minority hiring.³⁴

Republicans maintained that proportionality meant that white workers, not just white managers, would be treated unfairly. A compulsory FEPC “would discriminate against a man simply because he was a member of a majority rather than a minority,” Wiley noted. Better-qualified whites, he asserted, would lose their jobs or fail to be hired in the first

place as firms sought to boost black employment to avoid lawsuits or federal oversight. These white workers would then develop even greater animosity toward African Americans. Hoffman insisted that there was already evidence that an FEPC would be biased against whites: African Americans, he alleged, had held 59 percent of the jobs at the wartime agency.³⁵

Proportionality would also hurt African Americans, some claimed. A black worker, Wiley affirmed, should be judged on ability “rather than on the basis of some special privilege because of the fact that [he or she] is a member of a minority.” Hawkes recalled that knowing he could be fired at any time, and that he “could not go someplace else and demand a job,” fueled his determination to succeed. Wiley and other Republicans invoked heroic African American figures such as George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington as evidence that self-help was the surest path to economic uplift. The Wisconsin senator spun a folksy tale about an anonymous African American man who had wandered across the South during the Great Depression and eventually repaired a decrepit shack. “That colored man, not by legislation but by work and industry, did the job,” he declared. Hoffman similarly emphasized the “marvelous” progress blacks had made since the Civil War, while Senator Eugene Millikin (Colo.) pointed to the economic success of European immigrants as proof that “we have not done so badly in this country.” For Republicans, a compulsory FEPC would punish the successful, reward the undeserving, and erode African Americans’ ambition. They saw the United States as a society where any person could rise, provided he or she was willing to work diligently.³⁶

Republicans were not of one mind regarding proportionality, however. Some cited proportionality itself as the problem, whereas others spoke of it in more benign or even favorable language. Intending to show that his chemical plants provided equal employment opportunities without federal prodding, Hawkes pointed out that African Americans made up 22 percent of the workforce—higher than the percentage of blacks in the local population. Taft thought it would be appropriate for an FEPC to discuss the types of jobs blacks held, whether they were being used to full capacity, and what constituted a “proper proportion” of African American workers. During hearings held in 1947, the senator noted that

a Firestone plant in Akron, Ohio, had adopted a policy whereby 10 percent of its workforce would be African American. "There should be a relationship between the percentage, the number of people there, and the percentage of jobs available," Taft commented. He also noted that discrimination—"not conscious, perhaps, but actual"—often led to a dearth of jobs for African Americans. He proposed that a federal commission could gather data about employment patterns in a local black population and then use that information to lobby executives to boost black employment. The key was that businesses act voluntarily, not in response to federal orders or out of fear of lawsuits.³⁷

Republican critics often proclaimed discrimination to be morally wrong but then defended an individual's right to think and act in such a manner. Here, too, the core issue was the protection of individual choice, even if such choices were repugnant. An FEPC was yet another dangerous attempt, Millikin insisted, to "coerce conformity in human thinking." Millikin rejected bigotry, but he vigorously upheld a person's right "to give or withhold the use of his enterprise or his premises to those of another faith or race." Everyone, Hoffman declared, regularly exhibited personal preferences; doing so was simply a part of human nature and untouchable by law.³⁸

Republicans sometimes pushed back against southern Democrats' negative views of African Americans. When Senator Allen Ellender (La.) linked blacks' morality with criminal behavior, Taft offered a different explanation. "I think that discrimination in employment," the Ohioan declared, "makes it very difficult for colored people to make their living in honest ways and causes them to turn to crime."³⁹

More often than not, however, Republicans sounded like southern Democrats. Southern politicians had a long resisted change by alleging black inferiority, the evils of racial mixing, and ties between civil rights activists and communists. Some reiterated these themes, but they also used race-neutral language that trumpeted free enterprise and denounced federal power. Senator James Eastland (Miss.) warned that an FEPC would result in widespread lawsuits and "bureaucratic control of the whole economic life of the United States." The leader of the southern bloc in the Senate, Richard Russell (Ga.), predicted that an FEPC would lead to discrimination against "the ordinary, garden-variety of American

citizens who are not fortunate enough to associate themselves with some minority group.” Dixie lawmakers claimed that the region was making racial progress and would continue to do so, provided federal authorities left it alone. Pushing too hard for racial change, southern politicians warned, would lead to friction in the workplace and possibly violence in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.⁴⁰

These similarities were not lost on civil rights activists. Carl Murphy, editor in chief of the *Washington Afro-American*, wrote to Taft to denounce his “sissified, emasculated FEPC bill.” He pointedly noted, “Funny how you and the southern Democrats now sing out of the same book.” To Murphy and other reformers, it was irrelevant whether Republicans who opposed an FEPC were hiding racial malice or expressing sincere convictions about the role of government in business. What mattered was that GOP lawmakers allied with those whom African Americans had long regarded as hostile to their progress.⁴¹

Voting Rights

Civil rights reformers also wanted federal protection for voting rights. The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited states from discriminating against voters based on race. Other parts of the Constitution, however, gave states the authority to determine voter eligibility. Since the late nineteenth century, southern states had used ostensibly race-neutral literacy tests, the poll tax, manipulation of registration requirements, and violence or the threat of violence to deny blacks the vote. Dixie leaders insisted that these rules were legitimate attempts to prevent fraud and ensure an informed electorate. By 1940, just 3 percent of age-eligible African Americans in the South were registered voters. Reformers, however, received a boost in 1944, when the Supreme Court struck down the white primary, another device whites had used to maintain power.⁴²

Civil rights and labor activists demanded that the federal government outlaw the poll tax. Since the 1920s, several states had abolished this levy, but it remained in effect in others. Reformers believed that expanding the number of black voters would result in the election of politicians who would expand education and other social welfare provisions. Eliminating the tax was also part of an effort to change the criminal justice system.

Some states selected jurors from rosters of those who had paid the poll tax, and all-white juries were notoriously biased—dealing harshly with black defendants and often refusing to punish whites who had committed crimes against African Americans.⁴³

In 1944 Republicans had endorsed a constitutional amendment to abolish the poll tax. As far back as Reconstruction, the GOP had exhibited stronger support for guaranteeing political rights than for instituting economic reforms. Moreover, the poll tax was a regional issue. Republicans could vote for its repeal knowing that increased federal authority would not affect their constituents or change the political dynamics of their own states or districts. The GOP's stance put the party at odds with the NAACP, which viewed legislation as a quicker route to change. It also allied the party with some southern Democrats, who favored a constitutional amendment as a means of delaying or avoiding more far-reaching electoral reforms.⁴⁴

Anti-poll tax legislation had cleared the House, with overwhelming Republican support, in 1942 and 1944, only to die at the hands of a southern filibuster in the Senate. The House passed it again in 1945, and the following summer, southerners filibustered. Truman sat on the sidelines, and sixteen Republicans (roughly 40 percent of the GOP caucus) did not vote on a cloture motion. Wayne Morse called the episode a "farce." Walter White, head of the NAACP, lamented that liberals such as Morse "still represented a pathetic minority" in "a party dominated by the [Robert] Tafts . . . and Clare Hoffmans."⁴⁵

Republicans in Control

The 1946 election ended the Democrats' thirteen-year control of Congress. Republicans gained fifty-five seats in the House and thirteen in the Senate. The GOP performed well everywhere except in the South, which had no Republican senators and only two Republicans in the House. Racial matters received scant attention; one exception was California, where voters rejected a proposed state fair employment law by a two-to-one margin. As in the 1944 Philadelphia transit strike, whites felt threatened by the prospect of government action against employment discrimination.⁴⁶

Republican leaders attributed the party's improved showing in urban areas partly to "a large switch in the colored vote." The NAACP agreed that the GOP had registered some gains but chalked them up to blacks' frustration with the Democrats rather than support for the Republicans. Election results from the North and West had to be interpreted carefully. Politicians and pundits (and later, historians) often focused solely on the percentage of the black vote for one party or the other, but this might distort reality. For example, the percentage of the vote won by a Republican could rise if a sizable number of African Americans, who generally favored Democrats, stayed home. Thus, increased percentages did not automatically mean a shift in voters' loyalties.⁴⁷

As far as the NAACP and other civil rights activists were concerned, Republicans now controlled congressional committees and had the votes to pass legislation. But over the next two years, the GOP would exhibit little desire to change civil rights policy.

The Senate immediately faced a controversy involving race and region when it convened in January 1947. An interracial group from Mississippi had called on lawmakers to prevent Theodore Bilbo, a Democrat, from taking his seat. A former member of the Ku Klux Klan, Bilbo had praised the racial theories of Nazi Germany and regularly denounced nonwhite groups as well as Jews. Taft and other senators considered Bilbo an embarrassment but defended his right to free speech. By 1947, however, such naked bigotry had drawn increased fire from the national press and liberal activists around the country. Critics found Bilbo's campaign rhetoric from the previous fall particularly egregious. "I'm calling on every red-blooded American who believes in the superiority and integrity of the white race to get out and make sure that no nigger votes," he had declared, "and the best time to do that is the night before!" A Senate investigation revealed that black voters in Mississippi often encountered white violence. The three Democrats on the committee cleared Bilbo of responsibility, but the two Republicans concluded that he had abused his right to free speech. Senate Republicans agreed with their two colleagues, although legislators postponed a final decision about Bilbo's status owing to his poor health. The senator, who was suffering from throat cancer, died in August.⁴⁸

Civil rights activists were happy that Bilbo was out of the Senate, but

they were more concerned with the FEPC, voting rights, and a federal antilynching law. Murder and other forms of violence were state crimes, and all-white juries in the South would not punish white perpetrators, some of whom did not even face trial. Activists had been fighting for federal legislation, with assistance from some Republicans, for nearly thirty years. Several antilynching bills had passed in the House, only to die in the Senate, where opponents in both parties warned against expanding federal authority. Lynching had declined since its peak in the early 1900s, but a wave of violence against blacks had swept the South in 1946. A mob of twenty whites murdered two African American farmworkers and their wives in Georgia, and Isaac Woodward, a black veteran, was blinded by whites in South Carolina. In the spring of 1947, thirty-one whites escaped punishment for their involvement in the murder of Willie Earle, a twenty-four-year old resident of South Carolina. Some of the men had signed confessions or identified the man who had pulled the trigger.⁴⁹

Congress showed little interest. House Judiciary Committee chair Earl Michener (Mich.) refused to move on antilynching legislation, noting that he could be reelected without the votes of those who favored it. Citing a lengthy committee agenda, he argued that there was little point in acting on a bill that was certain to fail in the Senate.⁵⁰

An FEPC remained reformers' top priority. *The Crisis* editorialized in February, "If the GOP's heart really bleeds for the Negro as they say it does, if they really want him to come home to the party of Lincoln, they might try passing an effective FEPC bill." Opponents continued to allege that a compulsory FEPC would mean that the government could force employers to hire someone. Ives retorted that it was the "exact antithesis" of that approach. He and a small bipartisan group rallied behind a modified bill, but Republicans helped ensure that FEPC legislation remained stalled in committee in both houses of Congress.⁵¹

Other reforms suffered similar fates. Although a handful of Senate Republicans agreed with civil rights leaders' demand for majority cloture, GOP members of the Rules Committee helped kill such a proposal. House Republicans overwhelmingly lined up behind anti-poll tax legislation, but GOP leaders brought it up near the end of the congressional

session, which left no time for success in the Senate. Some Republicans confessed that this move was in part payback against southern Democrats, who had recently helped sustain Truman's veto of a GOP tax-reduction measure. Republicans focused their attention in 1947 on cutting taxes and curbing the power of unions. Civil rights was not a priority.⁵²

The Republican American Committee (RAC), an organization of approximately 200 African Americans, gathered in Philadelphia that August. Robert R. Church Jr., a Memphis businessman who had long been prominent in local and national Republican politics, headed the group. Church was also active in the local branch of the NAACP and was a close friend of Randolph, who had persuaded him to join the board of the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee. The RAC warned Republican leaders, "The Colored voter will not be deceived by legislative jockeying, buck-passing and double-talk." A compulsory FEPC, along with antilynching and anti-poll tax legislation, the committee predicted, would improve the GOP's electoral prospects.⁵³

Democrats, meanwhile, worked to retain African Americans' loyalty. In February 1948 Truman sent a package of civil rights measures to Congress. These included a compulsory FEPC, anti-poll tax and antilynching legislation, a commission to investigate racial problems and educate the public, and a bill to end discrimination in interstate transportation. Truman usually stayed out of the legislative fray, but he now had several reasons to get off the sidelines. The president was personally troubled by the violence against blacks in the South, and he wished to burnish the nation's image abroad to gain supporters in the emerging struggle with the Soviet Union for global influence. Given his low public approval rating, Truman also hoped to inspire blacks to turn out for him in November.⁵⁴

Though Church told GOP lawmakers that a compulsory FEPC would mean "better housing, food for the table, [and] shoes for the baby," Republicans in both houses were unmoved. Some talked about passing antilynching and anti-poll tax bills, but there was little enthusiasm for either. As the end of the session neared, *The Crisis* declared that the Republican Congress "has produced a big fat zero as far as the Negro is concerned."⁵⁵

Race and Republican Politics

Republicans were in a buoyant mood when they assembled that June to select a presidential candidate. Truman remained decidedly unpopular, and Democrats were divided. Henry Wallace, who had been vice president from 1941 to 1945 and then secretary of commerce under Truman until September 1946, had formed the Progressive Party. He attacked Truman as too conservative on civil rights and other matters. Southern Democrats, meanwhile, thought the president was too liberal. A Republican victory in November appeared certain.⁵⁶

New York governor Thomas E. Dewey bested Taft to capture the GOP nomination. Dewey personified the liberal, eastern wing of the party. Compared with their conservative colleagues, who were based largely in the Midwest and West, liberals favored a more active role for government in the economy and a more internationalist foreign policy. Republicans, they believed, had to adapt to a changing world if they wanted to regain power. A former prosecutor, Dewey had become governor in 1942 and then lost the 1944 presidential election to Roosevelt. Two years later, he was reelected governor by the largest margin in New York history. His success in the nation's most populous state, a Democratic stronghold, appeared to bode well for the GOP. Intelligent, efficient, and ambitious, Dewey conveyed an image of executive competence, but critics found him too reserved and uninspiring.⁵⁷

Though Dewey had drawn fire from some civil rights activists, he had a stronger record on race than any governor of his era. He had, despite some private reservations, backed New York's compulsory FEPC and named several African Americans to prominent posts. In the fall of 1945 he had condemned the banning of an African American singer from a Washington, D.C., concert hall. Two months prior to the 1948 convention he had signed a bill outlawing discrimination in higher education. Some of Truman's advisers worried that the governor might bring a sizable number of black voters back to the GOP. Dewey's racial views, however, were not a significant factor in his nomination.⁵⁸

Dewey chose another liberal, Governor Earl Warren of California, as his running mate. Warren had favored a voluntary FEPC in his state, but

the plan died in the legislature. He supported the desegregation of prisons, even though white guards threatened to riot. Warren also endorsed the state attorney general's stand against restrictive covenants, which prohibited the sale of property to racial minorities, thus maintaining neighborhood segregation. Nevertheless, Warren had fared poorly among black voters in the 1942 and 1946 gubernatorial elections. This pattern would recur frequently for Republican liberals in the post-World War II era.⁵⁹

At the convention, Republicans paid little attention to African Americans or their concerns. Former Connecticut congresswoman Clare Booth Luce denounced "lynch loving Bourbons, [and] white-shirted race supremacists of the Bilbo ilk," but other speakers, including Dewey, ignored race. A coalition of twenty-one black organizations, whose membership numbered more than 6 million, sent representatives to Philadelphia. African Americans, they informed the Platform Committee, were "deeply disappointed" that the Republican-controlled Congress had failed to pass civil rights legislation. "The elephant never forgets—or learns," one dejected member of the group told GOP leaders. The activists had no impact, however. Hoping to woo disaffected southern Democrats, the GOP replaced specific civil rights language with more generic wording. Randolph called the plank "lousy" and charged that the party had sunk "to its lowest depths of opportunism."⁶⁰

African American delegates stood on the margins of party affairs. They complained that southern delegations, which had once been majority black, were becoming increasingly "lily white." Blacks felt excluded from important meetings as well as social occasions. Some grew irate when the Platform Committee refused to hear an African American lobby for a ten-point civil rights program. Walter White similarly blasted the GOP for its lack of urgency about racial injustice and for treating blacks in a patronizing manner.⁶¹

Truman, meanwhile, moved to the left. In late July the president signed executive orders desegregating the military and outlawing employment discrimination by the federal government. Calling Congress back into a monthlong special session that August, he challenged the GOP to support his February civil rights proposals. Despite appeals

from high-ranking officials in the Dewey campaign to back *something*, Republican leaders showed little enthusiasm. A southern filibuster killed an anti-poll tax bill.⁶²

Republicans looked to the South as potentially fertile ground. The GOP had been trying since the early twentieth century to crack the Democrats' lock on Dixie. Herbert Hoover had won four Upper South states in 1928, plus Florida and Texas, but since 1932, every former Confederate state had supported Roosevelt. Although the South benefited enormously from federal spending during the New Deal and World War II, by the late 1930s, increasing numbers of whites perceived the federal government as a threat to the racial status quo, and they considered the Democratic Party too beholden to northern interests, including labor unions and the racial and ethnic groups that populated urban areas.⁶³

The Democrats' convention exacerbated these sectional divisions. Led by Hubert Humphrey, then the mayor of Minneapolis, northern liberals fought for and achieved a strong civil rights plank. Some southern delegates walked out in protest. They joined other irate southerners to form the States' Rights Democratic Party (known as the Dixiecrats), which nominated South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond for president. Preservation of white supremacy constituted the core of the Dixiecrats' efforts.⁶⁴

Prominent Republicans reached out to the South. Dewey's aides reassured southern leaders that the governor would not "throw the book" of civil rights at the South. Harold Stassen, the former governor of Minnesota, told an audience in Charlotte, North Carolina, that Dewey would find "intelligent compromise between states' rights and human rights which would satisfy Dixie." Appealing to white voters in Florida and Tennessee, Taft emphasized fiscal conservatism and limited government and spoke of a "basic agreement between the Southern Democrats and the Republican Party." (The senator had been eyeing the South for years. In 1946 he had privately noted that "the Republican Party would be willing to do anything to effect a union with the Southern Democrats" if the Democrats fractured along regional lines; he did not consider this likely, however, and indicated that the GOP had "a much better chance" of winning northern black votes than southern white votes.) Taft now predicted that Dewey would do well in several southern states and

might even carry Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida. Pundits observed that Republicans were making their most active play for southern support in decades.⁶⁵

A few Republicans urged vigorous pursuit of the black vote. They embraced the theory—first articulated by W. E. B. DuBois and then repeated by Walter White and other black leaders for years—that northern African Americans constituted the “balance of power” in a presidential election. Blacks’ support for Roosevelt had always been stronger than their support for other Democrats. Francis Rivers, an African American adviser to Dewey, counseled the governor to get behind civil rights legislation and campaign aggressively in black areas. But the GOP nominee faced an uphill fight: 1948 was the first year that a majority of African Americans identified as Democrats. Fifty-six percent lined up with the party of FDR, and just 25 percent proclaimed loyalty to the GOP. Eight years earlier, blacks had been split evenly, with 42 percent for each major party.⁶⁶

Certain of victory, Dewey ran a bland, cautious campaign. Although he enjoyed the backing of several prominent African American newspapers, he said little about race and largely ignored black voters; few African Americans attended his rallies. The GOP pointed to Dewey’s record in New York as proof that the Republicans offered meaningful action, whereas the Democrats were simply a party of words. Republicans also warned that voting Democratic would allow southerners to regain control of important congressional committees. These themes would reappear frequently in decades to come.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, Truman had a few cards to play. He benefited from blacks’ identification with the Democratic Party, and he proved adept at convincing black voters that he was their ally. The president had spoken out against racial injustice, submitted civil rights legislation, and signed two important executive orders to promote equality in the federal government. His Committee on Civil Rights, created in 1946, had tried to educate the public about the evils of racism. During the fall campaign, Truman became the first president to stump for votes in Harlem.⁶⁸

Truman won a stunning come-from-behind victory, and the Democrats regained control of Congress. The president’s triumph was attributable to the backing of several constituencies, but overwhelming African

American support in the pivotal states of California, Illinois, and Ohio was instrumental. Had Dewey received even slightly more black votes in two of those states, he would have won. Dewey did not receive a majority of black votes in any of the eighteen states surveyed by the NAACP. Truman was so popular among blacks in New York that Dewey received fewer African American votes there in 1948 than he had in 1944.⁶⁹

The GOP fared poorly in Dixie. White southerners stayed loyal to Truman or, in the Deep South, backed Thurmond. Although Dewey lost every southern state, he received more total votes in 1948 than he had in 1944. Most of the gain came from Texas, Virginia, and Florida, which would be among the first southern states to drift to the GOP in the near future. Dewey received less than 5 percent of the vote in Mississippi and South Carolina. Republicans' share of the major party congressional vote in the South fell from 17.4 percent in 1946 to 12.6 percent.⁷⁰

New Congress, Same Results

Civil rights activists renewed their drive to reform the filibuster when Congress convened in January. The three-month battle ended when the Senate easily approved a plan by Nebraska Republican Kenneth Wherry, the minority leader, that forbade a filibuster on motions to take up a bill; required two-thirds of the entire Senate (sixty-four votes) instead of two-thirds of those present and voting, for cloture; and prohibited cloture on a filibuster against motions to change the rules. GOP lawmakers backed the proposal by a four-to-one margin. Morse blasted his fellow Republicans for entering "an unholy political marriage with southern reactionaries." Another disgusted Republican commented, "I wonder why every Negro in the United States doesn't turn communist." *The Crisis* accused the GOP of "a sellout," and the *Afro-American* newspaper chain said it had erred in endorsing Dewey.⁷¹

Though the new filibuster rule made passing civil rights legislation more difficult, reformers pressed ahead. In January 1950 the NAACP and sixty labor, civil rights, civic, and religious groups held a National Emergency Mobilization rally in Washington, D.C. Four thousand delegates from thirty-three states attended, and their leaders proclaimed that an FEPC was their first priority. Congressional Republicans were un-

moved. When Senate Majority Leader Scott Lucas (D-Ill.) called for a civil rights test on a compulsory FEPC, Wherry stressed antilynching legislation. The Nebraska Republican agreed that some sort of an FEPC was needed but noted that because Americans were “a tolerant people, fair and just,” a compulsory approach would be too harsh.⁷²

House leaders moved forward on a voluntary FEPC bill sponsored by Republican Samuel McConnell of Pennsylvania—the first time any FEPC bill had been brought to a vote in either house of Congress. McConnell’s legislation revealed the depth of concern over the use of statistical evidence to gauge discrimination. It stated that a person lacking skills did not deserve a job because of his or her race and that low levels of employment among a particular racial or ethnic group did not prove discrimination. After blocking a compulsory bill, Republicans lined up behind the McConnell plan, which passed.⁷³

There was no chance that an FEPC bill would be approved in the Senate. Two cloture votes failed to halt a southern filibuster. Although a solid majority of Republicans backed cloture in each case, civil rights leaders were not impressed. Many of the Republicans who favored cloture opposed a compulsory bill. H. Alexander Smith feared that a compulsory FEPC would exacerbate racial tensions in the South, forcing the president to send federal troops to restore order. NAACP lobbyist Clarence Mitchell complained that the GOP was more interested in using civil rights to embarrass the Democrats than in passing necessary bills. “We must try,” he advised, “to place the Republicans in such a position when civil rights issues come to the fore they will not . . . back down or run out on us.”⁷⁴

Mitchell and other civil rights activists would have no success doing so during the last two years of the Truman administration. Senators Ives and Humphrey offered a modified compulsory FEPC bill that granted more state and local autonomy, but it went nowhere. Alarmed by violence in the South against black veterans, a bipartisan group of legislators proposed to make it a federal crime to murder, assault, or intimidate members of the armed services. The Senate, including a majority of Republicans, rejected that proposal. Other civil rights bills remained stuck in committee. An attempt to liberalize the cloture rule in 1951 also failed.⁷⁵

Race, Region, and Electoral Strategy

The GOP's unexpected defeat in 1948 sparked intense debates over the party's future. Democrats had won five consecutive presidential contests and controlled both houses of Congress for all but two years since 1932. Some Republicans contended that taking a more liberal stand on civil rights would help remedy these problems. Robert Church Jr. highlighted the party's failure to push for civil rights legislation and reminded RNC officials that they had ignored the 1938 recommendation of Ralph Bunche, a prominent African American intellectual and civil rights activist, to appoint more blacks to leadership positions. Party leaders in Cincinnati stressed that it was time for the GOP to stop talking about its role in passing Reconstruction-era constitutional amendments that provided legal protections for blacks. Ives, Morse, and others trumpeted more recent accomplishments, such as the 1949 election of Alfred Driscoll, a racial liberal, as governor of New Jersey.⁷⁶

But it was questionable whether the North was as progressive as the Republicans contended. The same year Driscoll was elected, Republican Albert Cobo won the mayoral contest in heavily Democratic Detroit, partly by vowing to protect whites from neighborhood integration. Over the next several years, he would remain popular among his white constituents by ensuring that public housing projects, where many African Americans resided, would not be built in their neighborhoods.⁷⁷

Most Republicans continued to either ignore or downplay racial issues. In May 1949 the RNC identified twelve policy objectives that could propel the GOP to electoral success. Civil rights did not make the list. Party leaders failed to invite any black Republicans to a January 1950 meeting to discuss how the GOP might improve its showing among African Americans. A month later, House Republicans released a statement of principles that contained a promise to "continue to sponsor and support legislation to protect the rights of minorities." Ives, Javits, and other liberals found this wording far too tepid. *The Crisis* observed, "Judging Republican performance, we conclude that the Party no longer regards itself as the 'friend' of the Negro."⁷⁸

Other Republicans openly challenged the liberals' prescription. Hoff-

man declared that Republicans were “barking up the wrong tree” if they believed supporting civil rights would garner more black support. The African American vote had been irrevocably lost, he claimed. Hoffman echoed the theme of the “bought vote,” a derisive concept employed by some Republicans since the 1930s to argue that Democrats rallied voters, including African Americans, through lavish federal spending. The 1950 election provided evidence to support Hoffman’s view. Among the New Deal coalition, no one remained more loyal to the Democrats than African Americans did.⁷⁹

Some Republicans favored an aggressive pursuit of white votes in Dixie. A month after the 1950 election, RNC chair Guy Gabrielson lamented that conceding the South had left the GOP with a big electoral vote deficit. He stressed that such an obstacle “might not have been too serious . . . when we had solid Republican states north of the Mason-Dixon line, but some of those states that were at one time very solidly Republican are now becoming marginal areas, and if we are going to build towards a stronger Republican Party that can carry a national election we must do some effective and constructive work south of the Mason-Dixon line.” The Democrats’ success since the 1930s in northern industrial states, once solid Republican territory, had altered the political landscape.⁸⁰

Other RNC members agreed. “There are certain definite changes in our political horizons that an alert party must consider,” one emphasized. “The South and the Southwest are the last remaining political frontiers for conquest by the Republican Party, to make up its losses in other sections of the country,” said another. In December 1950 the RNC passed a resolution to create a seven-member committee to boost the party’s fortunes in Dixie. A month later one committee member presciently forecast that Republicans might succeed in 1952 in Florida and the Upper South, but he also stressed that the party needed to organize throughout the region. Because building viable organizations might take two decades or longer, he pointed out, Republicans should start immediately.⁸¹

Clifford Case, a civil rights liberal, worried that his GOP colleagues were about to seek the support of racist whites in the South. This would

be futile and a “betrayal of our heritage,” the New Jersey congressman stressed. Predicting that segregation’s days were numbered, Case urged the GOP to cultivate nascent progressive constituencies in agriculture, labor, and industry. For Case, the party’s future in Dixie involved attracting new voters rather than seeking Democratic crossovers. He also believed that allying with segregationists would worsen the GOP’s standing in the North. Dewey’s margins of victory in New York, Michigan, and Pennsylvania had been perilously thin in 1948, he observed, and trading those electoral vote-rich states for the relatively sparsely populated South would be foolish. Other northern Republicans would make essentially the same argument over the next twenty-five years.⁸²

Conclusion

Inspired by the New Deal and World War II, African Americans worked to enlist the federal government in their struggle for equal employment opportunity, the right to vote, protection from violence, and several other areas. Liberals’ hopes that the postwar era would revive New Deal-style domestic reform, including progress on racial issues, went unfulfilled. Southern Democrats effectively defended the status quo, but so did Republicans. The GOP helped tighten the filibuster rule and firmly opposed a compulsory FEPC—the item of greatest importance to civil rights activists—as well as other civil rights legislation. Republicans’ rhetoric often echoed that of southern Democrats, and Thomas Dewey largely ignored black voters in the 1948 presidential election. African Americans often criticized Democrats, but they stayed loyal in part because Republicans did not offer an attractive alternative.

Most Republicans resisted demands for change by reiterating nineteenth-century notions of freedom of contract, upward mobility through hard work, class harmony, property rights, and localism. Anticommunism played a role, but it was a secondary concern. Politically, most Republicans saw little electoral incentive to pursue black voters. Those who favored a stronger federal role in racial matters or those who wanted to bring African Americans back to the GOP were few in number and powerless in Congress and the party.⁸³

As the Truman era drew to a close, Republicans looked forward to the

1952 presidential campaign, the first in nearly two decades without an incumbent Democratic president seeking reelection. The political winds seemed to be at their back. Voters had grown weary of the Korean War, and Democrats remained sharply divided over race and other issues. Republicans, meanwhile, thought they had identified the man who would restore the GOP's claim on the White House.

NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

CQ	<i>Congressional Quarterly</i>
CR	<i>Congressional Record</i>
DDE	Dwight D. Eisenhower
DDEL	Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.
LBJ	Lyndon B. Johnson
LCCR	Leadership Conference on Civil Rights
NP, LN	Richard Nixon Papers, National Archives, La Guna Nigel, Calif.
NPP	Richard Nixon Papers Project, National Archives II, College Park, Md.
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PPS	Pre-Presidential Series, Richard Nixon Papers, Richard Nixon Library, Yorba Linda, Calif.
WHCF	White House Central Files
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>
WSJ	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>

INTRODUCTION

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81. *Ibid.*; Minutes of Meeting of the Republican National Committee, January 26, 1951, in *Papers of the Republican Party*, reel 10, part 1.

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