

**Justice Talking Listening Guide**  
**THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**  
**10/3/2005**

**SHOW SUMMARY**

The Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s saw thousands of civil rights activists mobilize to protest against literacy tests, poll taxes and other discriminatory practices that had prevented African Americans from voting. The blood, sweat and tears of activists ultimately led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This summer in Montgomery, Alabama a number of these activists gathered to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act and to remember the struggle that was required to make the country protect this most basic right for all Americans. In a special collaboration with Court TV, Justice Talking was there to capture this retelling of an important chapter of our history. Included in the program is a debate over the upcoming reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act.



**Alex Keyssar**

• Part 1: **Alex Keyssar** is a professor of history and social policy at Harvard University. His most recent book is *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. Keyssar speaks about the history of the Voting Rights Act and the famous march from Montgomery to Selma, Alabama.



**Amelia Robinson**

• Part 2: **Amelia Boynton Robinson**, who was awarded the Martin Luther King Junior Freedom Medal honoring her lifelong commitment to civil rights, explains what it was like to fight for the right to vote in 1965.



**Ronald Walters**

• Part 3: **Ronald Walters**, director of the African-American Leadership Institute and author of *Freedom is Not Enough: Black Voters, Black Candidates and American Presidential Politics*, debates **Abigail Thernstrom**, vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and author of *Whose Vote Counts? Affirmative Action and Minority Voting Rights*, about the state of the Voting Rights Act today and whether key provisions of the bill should be renewed.



**Abigail Thernstrom**

• Part 4: **Reverend F. D. Reese**, who with Martin Luther King, Jr. organized voting rights protests, talks about how the march to Selma came about.



**Andrew Young**

• Part 5: **Andrew Young**, a veteran civil rights activist, and former Georgia Congressman, was the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He speaks about the future of the Voting Rights Act and a new campaign to change the day Americans vote, called Why Tuesday?



**Host Margot Adler**

Margot Adler is a National Public Radio correspondent based in NPR's New York Bureau. Adler's thirty years of experience as a radio host and reporter enable her to explore today's issues in an entertaining and insightful manner. She lives in New York City with her husband and son.



**Court TV's "In Pursuit of Justice"** is an ongoing public service and education initiative aimed at raising awareness about important judicial issues while inspiring Americans to become active and engaged in the law and judicial system. Visit <http://www.courtTV.com/ipoi/voting-rights-act.html> for more information.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

**The Fifteenth Amendment** – This amendment prohibits the use of race in determining which citizens can vote and how they do so. The last of three so-called Reconstruction Era amendments ratified in the period following the Civil War, the amendment sought to abolish one of the key vestiges of slavery and to advance the civil rights and liberties of former slaves. Section 2 of the amendment gives Congress the power to enforce it by enacting federal legislation that ensures racial equality in voting. The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 had little impact for almost a century because states imposed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other restrictions that kept African Americans from voting. But the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, along with a number of Supreme Court decisions interpreting these laws, have done much to guarantee voting rights for African Americans and other citizens of color.

**Poll tax** – Following the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment, many Southern states passed laws intended to discourage African-Americans from voting. States adopted poll taxes, which required voters to pay a fee in order to vote. Often these laws allowed any adult male whose father or grandfather had voted to vote without paying the tax, effectively disenfranchising African Americans and others, but permitting whites to vote.

**The Civil Rights Act of 1964** – This Act bars discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion and gender in voting, public accommodations (like restaurants and hotels), the workplace, and schools. The Act also created the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission to investigate discrimination in the workplace, providing not just the right to legal equality but enforcement as well.

**The Voting Rights Act of 1965** – Finding that existing federal anti-discrimination laws, particularly the Civil Rights Act of 1964, were not sufficient to overcome the resistance by state officials to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment (as soon as one discriminatory practice was held unconstitutional, states would impose a new one), Congress adopted this comprehensive voting rights law. The legislation, which President Johnson signed into law on August 6, 1965, temporarily suspended literacy tests, and provided for the appointment of federal examiners (with the power to register qualified citizens to vote), in divisions across the nation. Under this act any racially discriminatory act which prevented Americans from voting was prohibited.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the provisions of the Voting Rights Act that are up for renewal should be preserved?
2. In what ways do events like the march from Montgomery to Selma affect the legal system?



For more information, visit Justice Learning's Voting Rights Module at [www.justicelearning.org](http://www.justicelearning.org). There you'll find links to New York Times articles, an interactive timeline for voting rights, and more!