Voting Rights: The Poll Tax

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"We Shall Overcome!"

Lyndon B. Johnson

He stated, "There is no constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong to deny any American the right to vote. There is no issue of states rights or national rights. There must be no delay. The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro."

"Time For Waiting Is Gone"

Addresses Congress on Right to Vote
African-Americans were denied the right to vote in Texas and other Southern states simply because many could not afford to pay the poll tax required to vote. Organizations, such as the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, produced pamphlets aimed at informing Americans of how the tax deprived citizens of the right to vote. This pamphlet was issued in 1944, many years before the Poll Tax was finally repealed.
What is the Poll Tax and why does it restrict the rights of many Americans to vote?

Poll taxes required that eligible voters pay between $1.50 and $1.75 to register to vote. It was a campaign to limit the vote in the 1890s and early 1900s. The poll tax was added to the Texas Constitution in 1902.

The poll tax limits voting because the cost is out of reach for poor Americans.
What is the history of the Poll Tax in Texas?

On November 9, 1963, Texans voted on whether or not to repeal the Poll Tax. Editorials, such as this one in the Dallas Times Herald, called for the repeal of the tax.

...objection to removing the poll tax requirement has been that it would “allow” minorities to “flood the polls.” This contention is unworthy of fair-minded Americans. Men of good will have nothing to fear from their fellow men.”
What is the history of the Poll Tax in Texas?

In the *Dallas Times Herald*, the League of Women Voters supported the repeal of the Poll Tax and disputed the claim of lost dollars for schools if it is repealed.
Local religious and political leaders, pictured here in the *Dallas Express*, urged repeal.
President John F. Kennedy and other political leaders called for a repeal of the tax.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a letter to the *Dallas Express*, urged African-Americans to vote for repeal.

Rev M. L. King Urges Repeal Of Poll Tax

November 3, 1963

Dear Friend:

I am writing to you, my brother in Texas, from the Deep South. Although we are separated by thousands of miles, we are united by our history and our goals. We both have a dream, the same dream—the dream of being free.

In different parts of the South we work toward this goal in different ways. In Montgomery, we walked instead of riding the bus; in Birmingham, we faced fire hoses and police dogs. You must walk in Texas—but simply to the polling booth to vote this Saturday.

In the Delta of Mississippi, in Alabama, in South West Georgia, in so many places, we cannot vote. YOU CAN VOTE, and your vote on Saturday can free thousands of your brothers to vote in the future. You have a Heaven-sent opportunity to vote for repeal of the poll tax. In some Southern states, literacy tests are used to keep us from voting. In Texas, the poll tax has been used to keep us from voting. Now, in Texas, you can end it once and for all. You can have no tests AND no poll tax IF you vote for repeal Saturday.

The poll tax is a great evil, for it puts a price tag on freedom. We all know that thousands of people in Texas cannot afford the $1.75 price tag. I call upon you to vote FOR REPEAL of the poll tax Saturday and unleash a flood of new voters to help us all secure our full rights as Americans. Texans can lead the way. Elsewhere in the South, our people are undergoing great hardships to get the right to vote. They know the vote is one of the precious stepping stones to freedom. On Saturday, you can accomplish this great goal, peacefully and quietly. You have many allies in Texas—Negroes in other cities, Latin-Americans, talking-people, and thousands of others who long for a new era of liberty for all. Together, you can repeal the poll tax, IF YOU DO YOUR PART, I urge you to help the cause of freedom by voting for repeal this Saturday. Our prayers will be with you.

Yours in the struggle,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

And your vote on Saturday can free thousands of your brothers to vote in the future.
What was the result of the election on November 9, 1963?

Texas has once again chosen to keep the poll tax as a prerequisite for voting.
Why didn’t the vote pass?

…many persons who might have voted for repeal of the poll tax were not eligible to vote because they had not paid their poll tax for the year.
Why didn’t the vote pass?

From an opinion article in the *Dallas Express* on Nov. 23, 1963, [African-Americans] voted 38% of our real potential....
What happened concerning the poll tax after the repeal was rejected on November 9, 1963?

From Texas Politics, (http://texaspolitics.laits.utexas.edu/6_5_3.html), the federal government enacted the 24th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1964, which prohibited the a poll tax from being levied in national elections. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the poll tax unconstitutional in state elections.

On February 9, 1966, federal laws declared that the poll tax, still in effect in Texas, was unconstitutional. The Texas Constitution issued an amendment to repeal the Poll Tax in 1966. The tax had been in effect in Texas since 1902.