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April 8, 2022

Terror from the Top Down:
Violence and Voter Suppression in the Postwar South

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Abstract

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After the Supreme Court held in *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) that state laws barring African Americans from voting in Democratic primary elections violated the Fourteenth Amendment, key political figures in three states— South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi— went to extreme lengths to obstruct state and national efforts aimed at expanding voting rights. Just days after the Court handed down its ruling, South Carolina Governor Olin Johnston organized the privatization of the state’s Democratic Party in an effort to legally maintain its lily-white membership. Two years later, Georgia gubernatorial candidate Eugene Talmadge made headlines for his racist speeches while quietly suppressing thousands of votes through what the Federal Bureau of Investigation identified as the “wholesale purge of Negroes from the registration lists.” In the Magnolia State, Senator Theodore Bilbo’s direct appeals for racial terrorism in his 1946 campaign for reelection warranted a Senate investigation on the grounds that his campaign operated with a direct view toward denying African Americans their right to register and vote.

This thesis seeks to uncover and compare the strategies adopted by key political figures in the Deep South to resist the abolition of the white primary, as well as additional executive and legislative efforts to expand voting rights, in the years immediately following the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*. By framing the *Smith* decision as a major regional turning point in the history of voter suppression, I argue that legal disfranchisement in the postwar South took on a more clandestine nature than it had since the end of Reconstruction. This study aims to challenge scholarly interpretations of Southern politics that emphasize violence and overtly racist rhetoric while only briefly touching upon the seemingly mundane yet equally impactful forms of legal disfranchisement that evolved during the postwar era. Instead, I argue that violence and voter suppression were two sides of the same coin in the postwar South. Unearthing the specific ways in which whites legally resisted the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*, this thesis argues, offers necessary context behind the forms of disfranchisement that continue to persist in the American South more than a half century later.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the efforts of many.

Thank you to the librarians and archivists of Emory's Robert W. Woodruff Library, especially Dr. Erica Bruchko, who helped me refine my research skills and always pointed me in the right direction when it came to primary source material. I'd also like to thank Jennifer Brannock, who provided valuable assistance as I navigated the massive collection that is the Bilbo papers at the University of Southern Mississippi's McCain Library and Archives.

I received generous support from Emory's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry as I completed this thesis. Thank you to Dr. Walter Melion and Keith Anthony for directing the Undergraduate Humanities Honors Fellows program, and to the other undergraduate fellows for sharing their work and helping me fine-tune the way I conceptualize my own research.

My thesis committee assisted me through this process with their confidence and support. Thank you to Professor Hank Klibanoff and Dr. Carol Anderson, who lent me their time and expertise since the early stages of this project. When the archives came up short, Professor Klibanoff graciously shared nearly 800 pages of FBI records that inspired this project and served as the backbone of Chapter Two. My advisor, Dr. Jason Morgan Ward, has offered his insight and mentorship since we both began our time at Emory in Fall 2018. If I ever decide to enter the profession, I can only hope to be as diligent and thoughtful as Dr. Ward, whose steady encouragement and advocacy allowed me to complete this thesis during challenging times.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff of Emory's Department of History who have shaped my research through their coursework and continued guidance. In particular, I'd like to extend my gratitude to Professors Joseph Crespino and Maria Montalvo for listening to my ideas and offering their honest feedback at many points during this process. I would also like to thank all those behind the Honors Program, including Dr. Thomas Rogers, Lakeisha Hayes, and Jazlyn Jones, who helped me carry this thesis through the finish line.

Lastly, I extend my sincerest gratitude to everyone who has supported me during my time at Emory. My friends and classmates have constantly kept me grounded and made my time here enjoyable, especially amid the craziness of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. My sister, Abby, never failed to make me laugh during the most difficult moments, and I look forward to watching her begin her own journey at Emory this fall. This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my parents, Lara Kirts and Jonathan Charak. I thank them for their unwavering love and support.

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INTRODUCTION



Demonstrators at the White House picket lynching in the South, August 7, 1946. | Washington Star Photo Collection, DC Public Library, Washington, DC.

When World War II came to an end in September 1945, Americans were forced to grapple with what social scientist Gunnar Myrdal coined the “American dilemma,” or the contradictions between racism and the American perception of democracy.¹ As the nation celebrated its victory over fascism abroad, thousands of Black veterans returned to the Jim Crow South only to face racial violence and intimidation on the home front. Early efforts to register Black Southerners to vote gave rise to a reign of terror that engulfed the American South during the summer of 1946. Racial violence during the postwar era— which culminated in the quadruple lynching at Moore’s Ford in Monroe, Georgia— elicited national protests that prompted President Harry Truman to establish the President’s Committee on Civil Rights in

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

December 1946.² Yet as racial terror made national headlines, prominent Democratic officials in the Deep South engaged in more subtle forms of legal disfranchisement that systematically disfranchised Black voters in moments when violence alone was not a strong enough deterrent.

Legal disfranchisement during the postwar era stemmed from the South's history as a one-party region. When Reconstruction came to an end in the late 1870s, Southern Democrats were determined to reestablish the old racial hierarchy in the New South. Party elites began abandoning county conventions and private meetings to nominate candidates, and instead turned to the more modern primary election system in an effort to strengthen Democratic odds against the Republican Party of Lincoln. If intraparty disagreements were to be settled in advance of the general election, the Democratic leadership reasoned, whites would be more likely to unequivocally unite behind the Democratic nominee.³ Once elected, Democratic officials further consolidated their power by officially restricting political participation to whites only. Facially neutral measures such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and understanding clauses became barriers that stood between Black Southerners and the ballot box, effectively nullifying the newly ratified Reconstruction Amendments that granted African American enfranchisement. The most sweeping tactic states used to suppress the Black vote, however, was the white Democratic primary, which completely barred African Americans from voting in Democratic primary elections.

During the "Solid South" era of one-party dominance, which lasted from the end of Reconstruction until 1968, Democratic primaries were the only elections that actually mattered

² Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 18-24.

³ For more on the history of the Democratic Party in the South, see J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 72-75.

in the Deep South. While the white primary's proponents maintained its legality by claiming that Black citizens could still cast their ballots in the general election, Democrats rarely faced opposition in Southern elections. Because Democratic nominees almost always won the general election by default, scholars have argued that the white primary was uniquely effective compared to other disfranchisement efforts of the same era. Historians Thomas B. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan argued that soon after its inception, the white primary "became the great obstacle to Negro voting, more effective than all others combined."⁴ Implemented in all eleven former-Confederate states, the white primary served as a legal safety net to exclude even the Black voters who were able to meet the already rigid registration requirements.⁵

For nearly two decades in the early twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched persistent legal opposition to the white primary. After taking three separate lawsuits to the Supreme Court without success, the NAACP agreed to represent Lonnie Smith, a Black dentist from Houston, in a suit against the local election official who refused to let him vote in the 1940 Democratic primary. Four years later, the Court ruled that the all-white Democratic primary in Texas violated the Fourteenth Amendment.⁶ Black organizers celebrated the 8–1 ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* as a "decisive victory," and Smith himself boldly predicted that his victory in court would have a greater impact on United States history than any decision since *Dred Scott v. Sandford*.⁷ Yet the fight for

⁴ Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan, *The South Since Appomattox: A Century of Regional Change*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 109.

⁵ Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 11.

⁶ For more on the legal deconstruction of the white primary, see Darlene Clark Hine, "Blacks and the Deconstruction of the Democratic White Primary 1935-1944," *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 1 (January 1977): 43-59, and Anderson, *One Person, No Vote*, 10-15.

⁷ Roy Wilkins, "The Watchtower: A Decisive Victory!" *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 April 1944, 7, and Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 41-49.

Black enfranchisement was just beginning. The political elite in three states— South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi— would soon go to extreme lengths to preserve the white electorate.

This thesis seeks to uncover and compare the strategies adopted by key political figures in the Deep South to resist the abolition of the white primary, as well as additional executive and legislative efforts to expand voting rights, in the years immediately following the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*. By framing the *Smith* decision as a major regional turning point in the history of voter suppression, I argue that legal disfranchisement in the post-*Smith* South took on a more clandestine nature than it had since the end of Reconstruction. I utilize a top-down lens to approach this topic, focusing on the suppression tactics elite Southern Democrats turned to when the Supreme Court rendered the white primary unconstitutional. This study, however, will simultaneously emphasize the close ties between this form of elite legal disfranchisement and vigilante violence, which I argue were two sides of the same coin in the postwar South.

In his landmark 1949 study of Southern Politics, political scientist V. O. Key explained that the abolition of the white primary “precipitated a crisis in southern politics.”⁸ Yet current historiography typically examines Southern resistance to *Smith v. Allwright* within separate statewide studies of the civil rights era more broadly, and this scholarship tends to frame demagogic politics and vigilante violence as the main factors that contributed to mass disfranchisement during this era. For example, Jennifer E. Brooks offers an analysis of Eugene Talmadge's “race-baiting” during his 1946 gubernatorial campaign in her study on postwar Georgia but does not analyze his massive challenge scheme that resulted in thousands of Black

⁸ V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, (New York: Knopf, 1949), 619.

Georgians being purged from the voter rolls.⁹ Other scholars such as Peter F. Lau, who has written extensively on the history of civil rights in South Carolina, devote small portions of book-length studies to legal disfranchisement during the 1940s yet fail to situate these statewide campaigns to reinstate the white primary within the broader narrative of Southern resistance to *Smith v. Allwright*.¹⁰ This thesis aims to challenge scholarly interpretations of Southern politics that emphasize violence and overtly racist rhetoric while only briefly touching upon the more covert forms of voter suppression that flourished throughout the region during the postwar era.

While formative studies such as Steven F. Lawson's *Black Ballots* and, more recently, Carol Anderson's *One Person, No Vote* provide an excellent historiographical foundation with which I use to narrow my scope and periodization, this thesis is primarily in conversation with political scientist Robert Mickey's *Paths Out of Dixie*.¹¹ Mickey highlights the same three states I choose to examine in my own study and similarly identifies the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith* as a key turning point in Southern political history, but uses social scientific—rather than historical—methods to further his argument that Southern states constituted “authoritarian enclaves” until they became more fully democratized by the early 1970s.¹² Although Mickey correctly argues that the legal abolition of the white primary prompted Southern Democrats to “sharpen new tools to reduce the impact of blacks on Democratic primaries and electoral politics,” his chapter on postwar electoral reform fails to uncover the details behind these new suppression tactics. Mickey's analysis also stops short of assessing the ways in which voter

⁹ Jennifer E. Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 155.

¹⁰ Peter F. Lau, *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality Since 1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 145-186.

¹¹ Lawson, *Black Ballots*; Anderson, *One Person, No Vote*.

¹² Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

suppression in the immediate aftermath of *Smith v. Allwright* became a regional model for disfranchising Black voters.¹³

This thesis is organized into three chapters— one for each state-level case study. My decision to narrow the focus of my analysis to include South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi is rooted in the similarities in their political responses to *Smith v. Allwright*. When the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Smith*, eight Southern states still conducted white primaries. Of these eight Southern states, four of them— Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina— were Deep Southern states, meaning they share economic, demographic, and political similarities.¹⁴ While Black voters in Alabama continued to face discriminatory registration requirements, the state’s Democratic Executive Committee agreed to open its party primaries to Black voters before the 1946 primary season.¹⁵ Democrats in South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, on the other hand, went to similar extremes to sidestep the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Smith*. This thesis uncovers the details behind these efforts.

While this thesis is primarily organized according to geography and chronology, each case study has its own set of themes that contribute to a more complete understanding of legal disfranchisement in the postwar South. As this thesis demonstrates, legal disfranchisement comes in many different forms; in South Carolina, the political elite suppressed votes through legislation, while in Georgia and Mississippi, demagogic candidates illegally abused provisions meant to protect voter integrity. The Mississippi case study also examines the extent to which political rhetoric can become a form of legal disfranchisement. Although the details behind each

¹³ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 130.

¹⁴ Michael J. Klarman, “The White Primary Rulings: A Case Study in the Consequences of Supreme Court Decisionmaking,” *Florida State University Law Review* 29, no. 1 (2001): 65.

¹⁵ “Alabama Opens Primaries To Race,” *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), 19 January 1946, 10.

state's response to the abolition of the white primary differ, the close relationship between violence and legal disfranchisement proves to be a common thread.

I begin my analysis with the Palmetto State, when South Carolina Democratic Party leadership began plotting ways to circumvent the federal judiciary just days after the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*.¹⁶ Specifically, this chapter examines sitting Governor Olin D. Johnston's coordinated 1944 legislative attempt to reestablish the Democratic Party as a private organization by striking all laws pertaining to primary elections from the state code.¹⁷ This chapter emphasizes the way in which South Carolina Democrats at all levels of government unified around their shared commitment to preserve the white primary, and argues that this unity at a moment when white supremacy was facing one of its most formidable challenges since the Civil War is what enabled South Carolina to uphold the white primary in its entirety for about four years after its official abolition.¹⁸ Chapter 1 ends with discussion of the many legal disputes that unfolded before the Eastern District Court of South Carolina struck down the last of Johnston's discriminatory provisions, as well as insight into the vicious backlash that Black political participation incited throughout the state.

On the other side of the Savannah River Basin, Democrats were not as unified in their commitment to preserving the white primary in the aftermath of *Smith*. In Georgia, sitting Governor Ellis Arnall—a good-government liberal who lowered the voting age to 18 and favored the abolition of the poll tax—announced his opposition to any reactionary efforts aimed at nullifying the orders of the federal judiciary.¹⁹ As racial tensions simmered during the postwar

¹⁶ "Repeal Of More Than 200 Primary Laws On Way," *The Index-Journal* (Greenwood, SC), 15 April 1944, 1.

¹⁷ Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina: Regular Session of 1944 and Extra Session of 1944, General Assembly of South Carolina Joint Committee on Printing, 2324-25.

¹⁸ "35,000 Ignore Klan Warnings to Vote in South Carolina After 7 Decades," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 August 1948, 1.

¹⁹ John Couric, "Let Negroes Vote—Arnall Refuses To Join In Any Subterfuge," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 5 April 1946, 1.

years, the racial populist faction of the Democratic Party threw their support behind the 1946 gubernatorial campaign of Eugene Talmadge, who made reinstating the white primary a key issue of his campaign. While Talmadge is remembered as a racial demagogue who traveled from town-to-town captivating white crowds with his racist rhetoric, he was also responsible for quietly purging the votes of thousands of Black Georgians in over 90 counties through the use of challenge forms. Chapter 2 examines the 1946 Democratic primary, racial violence, and the reemergence of white populism in Georgia, with special attention awarded to Talmadge's comprehensive voter suppression scheme.²⁰ Legal disfranchisement in postwar Georgia took on a more clandestine nature than it did in South Carolina, I argue, because the white supremacist faction of the Democratic Party did not hold official power when the Supreme Court abolished the white primary in 1944. I end this chapter with an analysis of the ways in which major events such as the death of Eugene Talmadge, the Three Governors controversy, and the quadruple lynching at Moore's Ford effectively erased Talmadge's suppression campaign from both contemporary public knowledge and the historiographical narrative.

Much like Eugene Talmadge in Georgia, Theodore Bilbo galvanized the right-wing populist faction of the Democratic Party in Mississippi through incendiary speeches that advocated racial terror. Chapter 3 focuses on Mississippi's delayed yet aggressive response to *Smith v. Allwright*, which grew its roots in Bilbo's 1946 campaign for reelection to the United States Senate. Although Mississippi officials had yet to implement de jure disfranchisement measures similar to South Carolina, only about 2,500 African Americans cast their ballot on

²⁰ Edward T. Kassinger, "Unknown Subjects: Racial Discrimination in Registration of Negro Voters, State of Georgia," 24 October 1946, folder 1, file 44-114, FBI.

election day.²¹ At the request of Black organizers in Mississippi, the U.S. Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Contributions and Expenditures opened a public investigation into Bilbo's campaign on the grounds that his speeches created a culture of violence and intimidation that prevented Black Mississippians from registering and voting in the 1946 Democratic primary.²² In this chapter, I uncover and historicize the contents of this investigation, with emphasis on the relationship between rhetoric, violence, and disfranchisement. Chapter 3 ends by looking toward the future of civil rights politics in the 1940s. Indeed, disfranchisement became a powerful means with which Bilbo's ideologues in Mississippi and throughout the South used to resist racial equality over the next half century.

When compared to the racist rhetoric of reactionary politicians and outbreaks of vigilante violence, legal disfranchisement seems relatively mundane. But unearthing the specific ways in which whites resisted the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* offers necessary context behind the forms of disfranchisement that still exist today. In our current moment, allegations of voter suppression still run rampant in each of the three states I highlight in this thesis, and the tactics that figures like Brian Kemp in Georgia use to win elections through stifling the Black vote more closely resemble that of their predecessors than many would like to admit. I hope this thesis makes clear that disfranchisement is not simply the inevitable product of an American electoral system inundated by white supremacy, but rather the calculated outcome of individuals who have power and are willing to do anything they can to protect their status.

²¹ According to the 1940 census, Mississippi's Black population exceeded 1,1074,000. Mickey, 114 and Mark Lowry II, "Population and Race in Mississippi, 1940-1960," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 3 (September 1971): 576-588.

²² Earl M. Lewis, "The Negro Voter in Mississippi," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1957): 336.

CHAPTER 1

The Second Secession

On the evening of April 14, 1944, legislators in South Carolina packed the State House for an unexpected special session. Though the General Assembly was taking a regularly scheduled spring recess, sitting Governor Olin Johnston called all 170 members of both chambers of the state's General Assembly back to Columbia on short notice. Since the Supreme Court outlawed the white primary in *Smith v. Allwright* just eleven days earlier, Johnston had been facing pressure from anxious white South Carolinians to use his executive power to prevent African Americans from voting in the state's longstanding white primary. Committed to taking swift action, Johnston consulted with Democratic Party leadership and instructed legislators to strike all laws pertaining to the regulation of party primaries from the state code.²³ If the state of South Carolina cut all legislative ties to political parties and primary elections, Johnston and the white political elite reasoned, then the Democratic Party could legally exist as a private entity free of federally mandated integration.

When he opened the session, Johnston made his objectives clear. "White supremacy will be maintained in our primaries," he proclaimed before the Assembly. "Let the chips fall where they may."²⁴ As Johnston had hoped, the state legislature responded by repealing, before dawn, more than 200 laws "authorizing, recognizing, or regulating the organization of political parties."²⁵ Because elections are subject to state control, Johnston's legislative maneuver proved

²³ "Asks Solons To Eliminate Primary Laws," *The Gaffney Ledger*, 15 April 1944, 1.

²⁴ "Repeal Of More Than 200 Primary Laws On Way," *The Index-Journal*, 15 April 1944, 1.

²⁵ "S.C. Governor Rants As State Solons Gather On Primary Issue," *Atlanta Daily World*, 16 April 1944, and Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina: Regular Session of 1944 and Extra Session of 1944, General Assembly of South Carolina Joint Committee on Printing, 2324-25.

to be a quick and effective fix to the threat that *Smith v. Allwright* posed to South Carolina Democrats and their lily-white bases. Overnight, the state's Democratic Party went from a quasi-public institution subject to state election guidelines to become a private club with the self-proclaimed power of restricting membership on the basis of race. While Johnston's deregulation scheme would ultimately be unable to withstand legal scrutiny in the long term, his success in the State House that April night allowed the white primary to survive in its entirety for another four years in the Palmetto State.

As both the sitting governor and de facto leader of the state's Democratic Party, Johnston was in a uniquely powerful position to nullify the Supreme Court's orders through legislation. Yet Johnston's decision to privatize the Democratic Party was about more than just the recent ruling in *Smith*. During the war years, Black mobilization in South Carolina was on the rise, and federal integration initiatives such as the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) enraged white Southerners.²⁶ Johnston was by no means a racial demagogue like many of his white Southern peers, but he had political ambition and was running for a seat in the United States Senate against Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith, the 35-year incumbent known fondly among white Southerners as "the fire-eating, arm-waving, desk-pounding chairman of the [Senate] Agriculture Committee."²⁷ While other Democrats in South Carolina such as Ed Smith resisted early civil rights activism more forcefully—Smith was quick to declare the abolition of the white primary to be "the greatest crisis in the history of the South, far worse than Reconstruction"—Johnston had the General Assembly at his disposal.²⁸ The *Smith v. Allwright* ruling presented Johnston

²⁶ H. E. C. Bryant, "President's Committee On Fair Employment Has Hands Full," *The Index-Journal*, 26 November 1943, 4, and Norman Walker, "Southerners Expecting To Block FEPC," *The Index-Journal*, 26 June 1945, 1.

²⁷ "Colorful 'Cotton Ed' Prepared For 'Last' Political Race," *The Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), 16 July 1944.

²⁸ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 105.

with the perfect opportunity to prove his commitment to white supremacy while protecting his party's monopoly on South Carolina politics.

As Johnston coordinated the special session to legally bar African Americans from voting in Democratic primaries, South Carolina, like much of the country, was embarking on a wave of social, political, and economic transformation during the war years. Civil rights activism accelerated at both the local and national level during World War II under the auspices of the *Pittsburgh Courier's* "Double V" campaign, which promoted democracy both at home and abroad.²⁹ The Black press and organizations such as the NAACP also tied the global fight against fascism to the civil rights struggle at home.³⁰ Nationally, this early civil rights activism culminated in the establishment of the FEPC, which banned discrimination in defense and government industries.³¹ In the American South, however, Black soldiers returned home from risking their lives to fight fascism overseas only to face the pervasive racism and discrimination of Jim Crow. Wartime discrimination launched local organizing efforts regionwide; in South Carolina, chapters of the NAACP more than tripled between 1943 and 1946.³² While the war years catalyzed early civil rights activism, local Black organizing efforts and federal policies promoting racial equality fueled white backlash. As historian Jennifer E. Brooks has documented, white Southerners— both vigilantes and law enforcement officers— specifically targeted Black veterans with violence, often out of resentment for the unprecedented GI benefits they earned fighting overseas.³³ While the ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* is what prompted Olin

²⁹ For more on the Double V campaign, see Jason Morgan Ward, "The White South's 'Double V,'" in *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 38-66.

³⁰ F. W. Sayler, "Guest Editorial: Poll Tax Helps Hitler," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 25 July 1942, 22, and Joseph H. Rainey, "Let Freedom Reign: Hitler And 'Cotton Ed' Smith," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 18 December 1943, 5.

³¹ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 127.

³² *Ibid*, 136.

³³ *Ibid*, 13-36.

Johnston's legislative suppression scheme, the decision to legally disfranchise Black South Carolinians was also fueled by the burgeoning civil rights movement.

Johnston also had political motivations behind coordinating the wholesale disfranchisement of South Carolina's Black voters. Prior to the Supreme Court's abolition of the white primary and the political frenzy that then ensued, Olin Johnston was a dedicated New Dealer who kept a low profile when it came to issues involving race throughout his first term as governor and unsuccessful U.S. Senate campaign of 1938.³⁴ When the Supreme Court abolished the white primary in *Smith*, however, Johnston was once again running for a Senate seat in an unlikely race against incumbent Ed Smith. At first, Johnston struggled to compete against his opponent's cult of personality and well-established record of white supremacy. But Johnston was determined to ascend the political ranks. After his party deregulation plan went smoothly, Johnston hardly missed an opportunity to tout his role in privatizing the Democratic Party on the campaign trail, where he compared his successful deregulation scheme to Smith's relatively empty rhetoric. "I do not intend to base my campaign to the high office of the United States Senate on [the issue of race]," Johnston explained at a June 15 rally, "but, if any one of my opponents should make this an issue, my actions are positive proof of where I stand."³⁵ Indeed, Johnston's actions spoke louder than his words. For the duration of his campaign, Johnston refrained from overt race baiting or advocating violence— even after he systematically suppressed the votes of thousands of African Americans.

Legal disfranchisement on its own often seems mundane, and to be sure, the process is tedious. To pull off the deregulation scheme, Johnston had to coordinate the state's General

³⁴ Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

³⁵ Transcript of speech by Governor Olin D. Johnston, 15 June 1944, Olin DeWitt Tamadge Johnston Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

Assembly to officially repeal “each and every provision in the laws of [South Carolina] authorizing, recognizing, or regulating the organization of political parties... and the primaries, elections, or nominations in primary elections for a federal, state, county, or municipal office, or for any office in any other political division.”³⁶ In total, there were about 200 laws pertaining to primaries in the South Carolina code when legislators arrived at the State House on April 14, 1944.³⁷ Many of these laws criminalized election fraud and corruption, which were especially important in a one-party state where candidates with nearly identical ideologies relied on personality and smear tactics to distinguish themselves from one another in crowded primary fields.³⁸ In other words, the deregulation scheme would allow the Democratic Party to restrict its nominating process to whites only, but at the expense of election integrity in a political system that often rewarded deception.

In his opening address at the special session, however, Johnston argued that party privatization would actually *prevent* corruption by keeping African Americans away from the polls. To make this case, Johnston pointed to the “fraud, corruption, immorality, and graft” that he claimed plagued the South Carolina government during a brief period during the Reconstruction years in which African Americans voted freely and the General Assembly had a Black majority.³⁹ Johnston argued that the votes of Black South Carolinians would somehow be corrupted by Northern “agitators” trying to infiltrate white Southern politics. “History will repeat itself unless we protect ourselves against this new crop of carpetbaggers and scalawags who would use the colored race to further their own economic and political goals,” Johnston

³⁶ Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina: Regular Session of 1944 and Extra Session of 1944, General Assembly of South Carolina Joint Committee on Printing, 2324-25.

³⁷ “High Court’s Edict Defied,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 22 April 1944, 1.

³⁸ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 103.

³⁹ Transcript of speech by Governor Olin Johnston to the General Assembly, S54407, 241K01, Gov. Olin D Johnston papers (1943-1945), South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC.

declared.⁴⁰ By framing Black South Carolinians as Northern pawns or “outside agitators,” Johnston attempted to justify the legality of his legislative suppression scheme. While his speech remained consistent with his usual moderate tone on issues of race, Johnston concluded his opening remarks to the General Assembly by subtly alluding to the unspoken threat of violence that white South Carolinians would employ if necessary. Should party privatization prove ineffective, Johnston assured, “we South Carolinians will use the necessary methods to retain white supremacy in our primaries and safeguard the home and happiness of our people.”⁴¹ Even for Johnston, arousing violence was not entirely out of the question.

After legally reinstating the white primary amid the contentious wartime racial climate, Johnston received hundreds of letters from white supporters across the state and nation thanking him for taking a stand against the U.S. government on behalf of South Carolina.⁴² In one letter, Paul Green, a veteran from South Carolina who had just returned to the United States from a military stint in Italy, expressed the worry that he and his fellow officers felt upon receiving word overseas that African Americans might have won their right to vote back home. But “when election day for S.C. came and no Negroes [sic] in the state were allowed to vote,” Green wrote, “we were all proud of S.C.”⁴³ Johnston’s response to Green’s letter only reaffirms that his intentions in privatizing the Democratic Party were premeditated and carried out specifically with a view toward depriving his Black constituents of voting rights. “In regard to the negroes,” Johnston wrote back, “we were determined they were not going to vote on election day.”⁴⁴ While

⁴⁰ Transcript of speech by Governor Olin Johnston to the General Assembly, Gov. Olin D. Johnston papers (1943-1945).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Most of Olin Johnston’s correspondence regarding the white primary issue can be found in the Gov. Olin D. Johnston papers (1943-1945), South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC; some relevant material is also located in box 140, Olin DeWitt Talmadge Johnston papers, South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

⁴³ Sgt. Paul H. Green to Olin D. Johnston, 20 October 1944, Box 140, Olin DeWitt Talmadge Johnston papers.

⁴⁴ Olin D. Johnston to Sgt. Paul H. Green, 26 October 1944, Box 140, Olin DeWitt Talmadge Johnston papers.

Johnston used relatively moderate language to describe his commitment to white supremacy in campaign rallies and official statements, he did not hesitate to reveal his true intentions when communicating with his Democratic colleagues and most ardent supporters.

White South Carolinians like Paul Green were so adamant about protecting the white primary because the looming threat of postwar racial equality haunted them most. During the war years, the federal government mandated integration within defense and government industries, and thousands of Black veterans were entitled to government benefits typically reserved for whites only. As a result, much of the white excitement behind Johnston's legislative maneuver was fueled by increasing anxieties surrounding integration.⁴⁵ A. E. Butler, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Reserve, wrote Olin Johnston about a month after he reinstated the white primary. Butler expressed frustration with wartime racial progress, stating that the "negro problem" has been "growing while we boys are away doing our duty for our beloved State and Country."⁴⁶ While serving in Australia, Butler recalled, he found it bothersome that "it was nothing strange... to see a negro walking proudly down a street with a beautiful 'Aussie' girl." Capturing the regional taboo forbidding interracial relationships, especially those between Black men and white women, Butler asked rhetorically: "What's to happen when those fellows get back, after having been with white girls?"⁴⁷ As Butler's letter demonstrates, white South Carolinians linked the white primary to the preservation of racial purity. While Johnston also received minimal pushback for what one concerned Southerner referred to as his "white supremacy session"—mostly on behalf of student groups and women's organizations ridiculing his willingness to bar Black veterans, who risked their lives fighting fascism abroad, from

⁴⁵ W. Hume Logan to Dorothy Thompson, 24 April 1944, Gov. Olin D. Johnston papers (1943-1945).

⁴⁶ Lt. A. E. Butler to Governor Olin D. Johnston, Gov. Olin D. Johnston papers (1943-1945).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* For historical context on the relationship between racial violence and white womanhood, see Ida B. Wells-Barnett's seminal book, *On Lynchings*, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002).

obtaining full citizenship—his message was overwhelmingly well received among whites across the state and the region.⁴⁸

The enthusiastic response among South Carolina whites translated to votes in Johnston's ongoing campaign for Senate against Ed Smith. While "Cotton Ed" had the incumbent advantage and a decades-long record as a virulent segregationist, Johnston continued to calmly defer the people of South Carolina to his leadership role in the party privatization scheme throughout the course of the campaign. The day before the election, Johnston made one final plea to white voters. "Had it not been for my action, tomorrow you would be walking along with Negroes to the ballot box," Johnston remarked. "I believe in action, and not mere words."⁴⁹ This strategy of stressing deeds over words proved effective on election day—Johnston defeated Smith by a decisive margin despite the many odds stacked against him.⁵⁰ A *Time* magazine profile reflecting on the Senate race in the weeks following Smith's defeat credited Johnston's deregulation scheme as the single factor that enabled him to "[snatch] the bloody flag of 'white supremacy'" from Smith's grasp.⁵¹ While Johnston's original intentions may have been opportunistic and carried out with a view toward fulfilling his political ambitions, his legislative suppression scheme established a legal model for disfranchisement that Democrats in other Southern states would later attempt to replicate.

With the doors of the South Carolina Democratic Party officially closed to African American participation, Black organizers got to work. The most expansive form of voting rights organizing that emerged in the aftermath of Johnston's special session took the form of the

⁴⁸ Telegram from Southern Members of the Student Body of the Duke Divinity School to the Governor of South Carolina, 21 April 1944, Gov Olin D. Johnston papers (1943-1945).

⁴⁹ "Elections: Curtains for Cotton Ed," *Time* Vol. XLIV No. 6, 7 August 1944.

⁵⁰ "South Carolina Governor Beats Sen. Smith," *The Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, 26 July 1944.

⁵¹ "Elections: Curtains for Cotton Ed," *Time* Vol. XLIV No. 6, 7 August 1944.

Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Founded by Black newspaper editor John Henry McCray of the Charleston *Lighthouse and Informer* in May 1944, the PDP's mission was to provide Black South Carolinians with a political alternative to the Democratic Party as long as it discriminated on the basis of race.⁵² With the help of the state's growing NAACP network, the PDP gained a membership of about 45,000 by the end of WWII.⁵³ That McCray decided to build a new party from the ground up instead of joining forces with the Republican Party is indicative of the state of the South Carolina Republican Party, which was then broken into three factions and hardly a competitive force in state politics.⁵⁴ McCray and PDP leaders were determined to have an impact on state politics by running Black candidates, working with other civil rights organizations such as the NAACP to register Black voters, and most importantly, challenging the white primary.

Though the PDP initially formed around local politics to undermine the state's one-party system, McCray also sought to put pressure on the national Democratic Party at a moment when the future of the party was uncertain. In 1944, the Democratic Party was the party of both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Olin Johnston, and the increase in Black voters in the North due to the Great Migration only expanded this regional divide.⁵⁵ Aware of this debate within the Democratic Party, McCray attempted to make Black voices heard on the national stage by challenging the seating of South Carolina's all-white delegation to the 1944 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Looking to thwart the PDP challenge to the South Carolina delegation in

⁵² Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 42-43. Note that the Progressive Democratic Party was originally called the Colored Democratic Party, but the name was quickly changed to better reflect the interracial objectives of the party. For more on the origins of the PDP, see Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 136-37.

⁵³ Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, 42-43; Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 137.

⁵⁴ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 104.

⁵⁵ For more on the state of the Democratic Party in 1944, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 169-192.

the interest of easing intraparty tensions, national party leadership promised McCray that the United States Department of Justice would support his efforts in integrating the Democratic Party. The PDP was not strong enough to overturn South Carolina's white Democratic delegation at the convention, and the national Democratic Party ultimately failed to make good on its promise to support McCray in his fight to integrate the Democratic Party.⁵⁶ Regardless, McCray and the PDP mobilized local support behind resisting the white primary and contributed to the national Democratic Party's shift to the left.

As Black organizing efforts took off and World War II came to an end, South Carolina, like many Southern states, saw a devastating increase in racial violence.⁵⁷ On February 12, 1946, Isaac Woodard was traveling through South Carolina on a Greyhound bus. A decorated Black veteran who was honorably discharged just hours earlier, Woodard was still wearing his uniform when white police officers brutally attacked him for answering an officer "yes" instead of "yes, sir."⁵⁸ The beating, which became one of the most well-documented acts of postwar racial violence, left Woodard permanently blind.⁵⁹ Though the incident ultimately caught the attention of President Truman, Woodard's attackers were ultimately acquitted and police officers in Columbia continued to regularly harass Black soldiers without making the pages of national newspapers.⁶⁰ Because Johnston's efforts were both swift and effective, white South Carolinians were less inclined to turn to extralegal means of suppressing the Black vote in the immediate aftermath of *Smith v. Allwright* than their counterparts in Georgia and Mississippi. But as African

⁵⁶ Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, 44-46.

⁵⁷ Dixie Terrorists Lynch Four More As Probe In GA. Reaches Stalemate," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 24 August 1946, 1.

⁵⁸ "Absolve Police Chief Who Beat Isaac Woodard," *New Journal and Guide*, 9 November 1946, 1.

⁵⁹ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 156-58.

⁶⁰ "Pres. Truman Disturbed By Fighting Mood: Randolph Points Out Jim Crow, Bias 'Red' Weapons," *Atlanta Daily World*, 24 March 1948, 1, and Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 156.

Americans organized to resist disfranchisement amid the already tense postwar years, racial violence spiked.

By the time the 1946 Democratic primary season was underway, McCray's organizing efforts were beginning to come to fruition. Accompanied by Reverend James Hinton of the Negro Citizens Committee (NCC) and Robert W. Mance of the NAACP, George Elmore, a Black businessman from Columbia, walked into his local grocery store to register to vote. The registrar, who was confused by Elmore's racially ambiguous appearance, invited Elmore to sign his name on the Democratic Party rolls. It wasn't until George Elmore wrote down his address that the clerk realized she had mistaken him for a white man. "Why, you're a damned nigger, too," the registrar exclaimed before reluctantly allowing Elmore to place his name on the books. After she told Elmore to "tell the rest of you damned niggers you can come in and register too," Hinton and Mance entered the store and wrote down their names alongside Elmore's.⁶¹ Like other Black voters who managed to get their names on the rolls, Elmore arrived at his polling place to cast his vote on election day only to be turned away by Richland County election officials who refused to give him a ballot.⁶² These cases collectively became a class-action lawsuit, *Elmore v. Rice*, with Elmore and the plaintiffs represented by a standout legal team of civil rights attorneys that included Thurgood Marshall, who was then serving as the executive director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.⁶³

About a year after Elmore was turned away at his polling place, the Eastern District Court of South Carolina finally handed down a promising ruling in *Elmore v. Rice* on July 12, 1947. After denying the defendants' motion for a jury trial, Judge Julius Waties Waring wrote a

⁶¹ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 175-76.

⁶² Hinton also encouraged ten Black voters in Spartanburg to cast their ballots on election day. See "S.C. Conducts A 'Last Stand' White Primary," *The Chicago Defender*, 24 August 1946, 1.

⁶³ *Elmore v. Rice*, 72 F. Supp. 516 (E.D.S.C. 1947).

scathing opinion that completely rejected the constitutionality of Johnston's 1944 scheme to privatize the Democratic Party.⁶⁴ A white Charleston native and son of the South, Waring did not appear to pose a threat to South Carolina's white political order. Yet Waring was an outspoken supporter of desegregation and did not hold back in calling out his fellow white Democrats for their coded special session.⁶⁵ "When the General Assembly, answering the call of Governor Johnston, met in extraordinary session," Waring wrote, "it was wholly and solely for the purpose of preventing the Negro from gaining a right to vote."⁶⁶ In other words, Waring recognized that the General Assembly acted with the express purpose of denying African Americans the right to choose their elected officials, as the Democratic primary was the only election where voters had the opportunity to make choices about their elected officials at both the state and federal level. Thus, Waring was explicit in legally mandating that the Democratic Party open their primary elections to all South Carolinians regardless of race. He was also conscious of what the ruling meant within the context of the national civil rights movement, declaring that "it is time for South Carolina to rejoin the union... to fall in step with the other states and to adopt the American way of conducting elections."⁶⁷

South Carolina's quest to rejoin the union, however, was just getting started. Just as John McCray predicted, white Democrats attempted to sidestep Waring's ruling by adopting a set of confusing rules to effectively reinstate the white primary a second time in May 1948.⁶⁸ One of the driving forces behind the charge against *Elmore* was the Charleston *News and Courier*. As the main daily newspaper in Charleston, the *News and Courier* published editorials urging the

⁶⁴ Memorandum to Mr. Wilkins from Marian Perry, Papers of the NAACP, Part 4: Voting Rights Campaign, 1916-1950, Group II, Series B, Legal File: "Voting, 1940-1955," NAACP Papers.

⁶⁵ Irwin Klibaner, "The Travail of Southern Radicals: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1976," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 2 (May 1983): 185.

⁶⁶ *Elmore v. Rice*, 1947.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, 110.

Democratic Party to resist the *Elmore* ruling under the supervision of managing editor Thomas Waring, Judge Julius Waring's nephew.⁶⁹ Though the decision in *Elmore* was clear, state party officials did just as South Carolina whites proposed: they argued that Waring's ruling technically only barred African Americans from voting in Democratic *primary elections*, and not from Democratic Party *membership*. Under this premise, participants at the state's 1948 Democratic convention voted to restrict membership in the party to whites only and made eligibility to vote in primary elections contingent upon membership status. Party leadership also implemented an oath pledging support for "the social, religious and educational separation of the races," which all members were required to take.⁷⁰ The new membership requirements placed the authority to confirm or deny membership requests, and with it, access to the ballot box, into the hands of white party officials. Even after what first seemed like a promising ruling in *Elmore v. Rice*, South Carolinians could only qualify to register and vote in Democratic primary elections if they could provide proof of party membership—and in order to become a member of the Democratic Party, voters were required to take an oath pledging their commitment to white supremacy.

While the white Democratic elite searched for more loopholes to sidestep the *Elmore* ruling, racial violence persisted throughout the state. In February 1947, as Elmore and his legal team awaited the district court's initial ruling, Willie Earle, a Black man accused of murdering a white cab driver in Greenville, South Carolina, was abducted from the Pickens County jail by a white mob. Though Earle had yet to be tried for the murder, he was stabbed, tortured, and fatally shot in the head at the hands of upwards of 30 white vigilantes, his body left on the side of a

⁶⁹ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, (New York: Knopf, 2006), 36-37.

⁷⁰ Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 178.

country road between Greenville and Pickens.⁷¹ Although the most sweeping voter suppression in South Carolina took place on the State House floor rather than behind closed doors, whites increasingly turned to extralegal violence as the courts began to undermine Johnston's legal disfranchisement measures. Earle's lynching, which took place almost one year to the day after Isaac Woodard's attack, represents a continuation of the cyclical pattern of white backlash to racial progress that had been gaining momentum since the end of World War II. In postwar South Carolina, violence and voter suppression went hand in hand and were directly tied to the expansion of voting rights.

Some white supremacist Democrats strategically condemned the upsurge in racial violence while they condoned efforts to legally disfranchise Black voters. Unlike the officers who attacked Isaac Woodard a year earlier, Willie Earle's lynchers faced the condemnation of some of South Carolina's most prominent elected officials. "The case of Willie Earle is not only regrettable," Strom Thurmond, who was then less than a year into his only term as governor, stated in a press release two days after Earle's killing, "but it is a blot on the state of South Carolina."⁷² Although Thurmond would later go on to solidify his legacy as one of the South's most vocal segregationists to serve in the U.S. Senate—most notably through his infamous 24-hour filibuster against the Civil Rights Act of 1957—he was elected governor in 1946 on a relatively progressive platform that emphasized Southern liberalism, and his rebuke of Earle's lynchers was more than merely rhetorical.⁷³ In the weeks after the killing, Thurmond demanded that state officials work with local law enforcement and the FBI, oversaw the arrest of several of

⁷¹ "31 Whites to Face Court in Killing of Willie Earle," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 May 1947, and "Willie Earle, 35 Negro," *The Chicago Defender*, 1 March 1947, 10.

⁷² Strom Thurmond, "Willie Earle Case" 18 February 1947, MSS 100, 67, Strom Thurmond Collection, Clemson University Libraries, Clemson, SC.

⁷³ For more on Strom Thurmond, see Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

the white men involved in the killing, and appointed a well-respected attorney with an impressive record as the lead prosecutor. Though an all-white jury ultimately acquitted all 31 white men charged with Earle's murder, Black Southerners praised Thurmond and other South Carolina officials for his honest efforts.⁷⁴

Thurmond and other Democrats who echoed his sentiments were strong in their stance against lynching yet refused to take steps toward integrating the Democratic Party so they could vote. The national press coverage surrounding Earle's killing highlighted, in the words of journalist John Popham of *The New York Times*, "the paradoxical handling of the race problem in the South."⁷⁵ In one article, Popham praised Thurmond for his role in securing swift indictments, yet also gave voice to Black leaders who suggested that Thurmond would benefit politically by supporting the white primary's abolition. If Thurmond's Black constituents won the right to vote in Democratic primaries, Popham reasoned, they would support Thurmond in large numbers "as a Negro gesture of gratitude... for the position which he had taken in this case."⁷⁶ Some coverage of the Earle lynching portrayed the relationship between violence and legal disfranchisement as even more direct. An article in the *New Journal and Guide*, an African American weekly, reported on Thurmond's action against Earle's lynchers alongside his silence on the issue of the white primary.⁷⁷ Despite the interconnectedness between the two issues and Popham's strong case for coming out in favor of party integration, Thurmond decided that allowing Black citizens to participate in the Democratic primary was a step too far in the direction of racial equity. Instead, he touted his handling of the Earle case when he wanted to

⁷⁴ "Acquittal Of Lynchers Regarded Blow To South," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 31 May 1947, 1.

⁷⁵ John N. Popham, "Civic Courage Shown In Key Carolina Trial: Governor, Officials and Citizens Seek Swift Justice in Lynching," *The New York Times*, 18 May 1947, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Modjeska M. Simkins, "Palmetto State: South Carolina's Governor Speaks His Mind About Mobs And Lynchers," *New Journal and Guide*, 1 March 1947, 7.

showcase his record as a Southern liberal, which gave his stance on the white primary and voter suppression the guise of moderation.

Thurmond's decision to overlook the political gains he could collect by supporting voting rights highlights the ways in which white supremacy continued to fuel South Carolina politics once Johnston's legislative suppression scheme faced legal challenges. As the newly elected governor, Thurmond had both executive power at the state level and a prominent informal leadership role within the South Carolina Democratic Party. With the Democratic Party already privatized, Thurmond kept his stance on the white primary out of the public record as he waited for courts to settle questions surrounding its legitimacy.⁷⁸ Thurmond did not oversee the implementation of additional legal disfranchisement measures like Olin Johnston did, but his silence on the issue spoke volumes. By keeping quiet, Thurmond condoned his state's legal disfranchisement efforts without drawing any additional pushback from civil rights groups or the federal government. Though Thurmond would go on to dishonestly claim credit for abolishing the white primary in South Carolina as evidence that states could effectively handle their own civil rights policies without federal intervention, his inaction at a time when he had the power to desegregate the Democratic Party only stood in the way of the white primary's abolition.⁷⁹ For white Democrats, excluding African Americans from primary elections was not merely about protecting individual political power— otherwise, they would have supported voting rights and accepted the votes of the newly enfranchised electorate. As Thurmond's response to the Earle lynching demonstrates, Democrats aimed to preserve the *white* political power in their state.

⁷⁸ "South Carolina White Primary Loses in Appeal," *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 December 1947, 9.

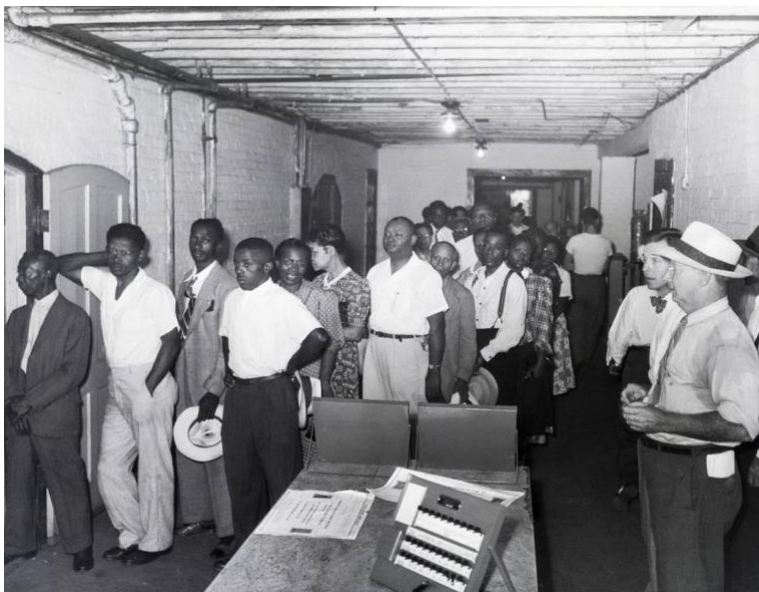
⁷⁹ "Thurmond Takes Credit for White Primary Ruling: Dixiecrat Candidate Insists States Handle Own Civil Rights Problems," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 9 October 1948, 3.

While state Democrats and white vigilantes worked hard to resist racial progress, Black South Carolinians continued to fight for the voting rights they had already won many times over. In July 1948, the NAACP represented David Brown, a Beaufort County officer for John McCray's Progressive Democratic Party. Brown managed to gain Democratic Party membership before party officials purged his name from the rolls less than a month before the August 10 primary and subsequently filed a lawsuit claiming unlawful disfranchisement, which would eventually become known as *Brown v. Baskin*. Brown's case was heard by Judge Waring, who Waring received threats of violence from proponents of the white primary as he prepared for trial. One letter addressed to Waring threatened him with "the fearful race hatred that will follow any adverse decision that you may render in the present case... against the white people of your own state." The letter was signed in red ink: "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan members."⁸⁰ For South Carolina's diehard white supremacists, stakes were high as Waring was once again set to decide the fate of the white primary.

Despite these threats of violence, Waring reaffirmed his earlier ruling in *Elmore* and issued an injunction requiring the Democratic Party to open its rolls to all South Carolinians regardless of race. Waring did not waver in calling out Democratic Party officials for evading his original ruling in *Elmore*. "It is important that once and for all, the members of this Party be made to understand... that they will be required to obey and carry out the orders of this court, not only in the technical respects but in the true spirit and meaning of the same."⁸¹ Waring also

⁸⁰ "Accused of Favoring Negro Voters' Rights, Federal Judge Gets Ku Klux Klan Threat," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 30 October 1948, 1.

⁸¹ *Brown v. Baskin et al.*, 78 F. Supp. 933 (District Court, E.D. South Carolina, Charleston Division, 1948).



Black voters line up at the polls in South Carolina, August 11, 1948. | Buzzfeed News

demanded that the Democratic Party leave their enrollment books open for extended hours, and threatened jail time to those who did not comply with the court’s orders. Between Waring’s July 20 decision and the August 10 primary, upwards of 35,000 African Americans registered to vote in the 1948 Democratic primaries— a 700 percent increase in registered Black voters in the state since 1946.⁸²

In August 1948— more than four years after the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*— African Americans were able to vote in the only elections that actually mattered for the first time since Reconstruction. Waring’s decision in *Brown v. Baskin* officially marked the end of the Democratic Party’s string of legal maneuvers to preserve the white primary; the moment was so momentous that John Henry McCray dubbed the 1948 primaries the “Second Emancipation.”⁸³ McCray also decided to disband the PDP not long after the ruling in *Baskin*, later explaining that the party’s existence would only “nullify the intent and

⁸² “35,000 Ignore Klan Warnings to Vote in South Carolina After 7 Decades,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 August 1948, 1.

⁸³ John H. McCray, “Columbia’s Ninth Ward List Shows 1,400 Negro Voters, Only 300 Whites,” *The Chicago Defender*, 21 August 1948.

spirit of the Elmore [decision]” by acting as a barrier between African Americans and mainstream Democratic politics.⁸⁴ McCray was not the only one to recognize what the 1948 Democratic primary meant for voting rights in South Carolina, however. As the Ku Klux Klan had promised in the letter to Judge Waring, violence erupted throughout the state in the weeks leading up to the August 10 election. Local chapters of the Klan held parades in towns across the state, setting two large crosses ablaze on either side of the Storm Branch Baptist Church located just outside of Augusta, Georgia, the night before the election.⁸⁵ While the blanket ban on Black voting had been lifted, legal disfranchisement persisted as poll workers were empowered to withhold ballots at their personal discretion. Judge Waring himself was a victim of election day disfranchisement; when he arrived at the polls to cast his ballot in the Democratic primary, an election officer informed him that his name was mysteriously missing from the rolls.⁸⁶ While the NAACP’s victory in *Brown v. Baskin* marked a key victory in South Carolina’s civil rights history, the subsequent wave of Black enfranchisement gave rise to vicious reactionary backlash— once again highlighting the ways in which violence and voter suppression were intertwined in the postwar South.

While the 1948 election marked the official end of the white primary in the Palmetto State, violence and intimidation continued to persist throughout the remainder of the decade. Judge Julius Waites Waring, who gained national recognition for his role in striking down South Carolina’s white primary system, remained outspoken proponents of Black enfranchisement as the civil rights movement progressed. As a result, Waring and his family continued to be popular

⁸⁴ McCray, “Columbia’s Ninth Ward List Shows 1,400 Negro Voters, Only 300 Whites,” and John Henry McCray to Mr. Thompson, 25 June 1964, box 3, folder 8, John Henry McCray papers, 1929-1989, University of South Carolina Libraries, Columbia, SC.

⁸⁵ John Henry McCray to Mr. Thompson, 25 June 1964, John Henry McCray papers.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

targets of white supremacist violence and intimidation. Several months after Waring struck down the South Carolina white primary once and for all in *Brown v. Baskin*, whites in Colleton County petitioned for his impeachment. The same week that the petitions began circulating, vigilantes held two cross burnings in the same county.⁸⁷ Waring's wife, Elizabeth Avery Waring, was also active in local civil rights circles. After she stated that white supremacists were "a sick and decadent [people]" before a Black audience during a public address, the Waring household received many anonymous phone calls and letters threatening their safety.⁸⁸ The remarks also caught the condemnation of Governor Strom Thurmond, who accused both Elizabeth and Julius Waring as falling in line with President Harry Truman's "un-American, communistic and anti-southern program."⁸⁹ The continued outrage against Waring and his family reflects the influx of Black voter registration as a result of Waring's ruling in *Brown v. Baskin*.

Violent responses to the expansion of voting rights were a regional trend that extended beyond South Carolina state lines. In February 1949, James Hinton was living in Augusta, Georgia, and served as president of the South Carolina conference of the NAACP. After publicly denouncing Thurmond's support of the Klan, Hinton received a threatening postcard with a message that threatened Hinton: "There will be a cross burning but we will have you on top of the cross."⁹⁰ Though the author was not known, the card was signed "KKK." About a month after receiving the postcard, a white mob abducted James Hinton from his Augusta home.⁹¹ Hinton ultimately escaped unharmed about four hours later, and the motive of his abductors remains unclear. But Hinton suspected the incident was retaliation for his "militant stand for equal

⁸⁷ Henry Lesesne, "Ouster Petitions Aimed At South Carolina Judge," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 February 1950, 7.

⁸⁸ John H. McCray, "Champions of Democracy Bear Crass Of Insults From White Supremacists," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 January 1950, 7.

⁸⁹ "S. C. Governor Takes New Jab At Mrs. Waring," *Atlanta Daily World*, 14 February 1950, 1.

⁹⁰ "Klan Mails Threat to Civic Leader," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 February 1949, 1.

⁹¹ "S. C. NAACP Leader Abducted: J.M. Hinton Freed After Four Hours," *New Journal and Guide*, 30 April 1949.

educational opportunities for Negroes, and various other civic activities, many of which have been carried out in Georgia.”⁹² Hinton’s abduction illustrates the fluidity of voting rights activism in the postwar South. Just as Democrats often resisted the *Smith* ruling in similar ways from state to state, voting rights activism was not always confined to the borders of a single state. In Georgia, Black voters experienced many of the same barriers to voting in Democratic primaries as they did in South Carolina, and the geographic proximity of the two states was conducive to overlap.

⁹² “The Kidnapping of Hinton,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 26 April 1949, 6.

CHAPTER 2

The ‘Fruits of Talmadgeism’

On July 7, 1946, African Americans in Soperton, Georgia, held their first Sunday service in a newly repurposed building. The white landowner had recently given the property, which was located nearly three miles outside the rural town of about 1,300 people, to the African American community to use as a school and church.⁹³ A white tenant farmer allegedly interrupted the service by threatening the Black congregants, and by 10:15 the following night, white vigilantes had burned the church to the ground.⁹⁴ As the church lay smoldering in the darkness of night, Eugene Talmadge—the populist former governor of Georgia vying for the Democratic nomination to serve a fourth term—was preparing to give a speech about 250 miles away from Soperton in the North Georgia mountains. Talmadge warned the crowd in LaFayette that the state was under an imminent danger of being taken over by African Americans and “outside influences,” before reaffirming his commitment to the restoration of the white primary, which the Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional two years earlier.⁹⁵

Writers for the *Atlanta Constitution* were quick to connect the Soperton church burning to Talmadge’s racially charged rhetoric. The perpetrators were “fanatics,” according to a July 10 editorial, who were “aroused to fury against Negroes by the Talmadge speeches and writings.”⁹⁶ The editorial board characterized such acts of violence as the “fruits of Talmadgeism,” which

⁹³ Data from the 1940 Census, taken from the United States Census Bureau “Census of Population and Housing,” 1940.

⁹⁴ Ira De A. Reid, “Persons and Places,” *Phylon* 7 (3rd Qtr., 1946): 290. See also Patrick Novotny, *This Georgia Rising: Education, Civil Rights, and the Politics of Change in Georgia in the 1940s* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007), 194.

⁹⁵ “Jimmie Asks Good Rule; Halt Negroes Says Gene,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 10 July 1946.

⁹⁶ “Fruits of Talmadgeism,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 10 July 1946.

would prosper should Talmadge win another term as governor in 1946.⁹⁷ The next week, Eugene Talmadge narrowly won the Democratic nomination after running a campaign rooted in violence and intimidation. Because the Republican Party chose not to nominate a candidate to oppose Talmadge in the general election— like South Carolina, Georgia was a one-party state— Talmadge effectively became the governor-elect as soon as the primary results came in.⁹⁸

The 1946 Democratic primary in Georgia became a testing ground for white supremacy at a moment when electoral reforms threatened to open the state’s politics to Black participation. While Democrats in South Carolina united in a shared commitment to the preservation of the white primary in the aftermath of *Smith*, party leaders in Georgia disagreed on the best way to proceed. Because sitting Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall decided against launching an official opposition campaign to the Court’s ruling similar to Johnston, the white-supremacy faction of the Democratic Party needed to resort to extralegal tactics in order to prevent Black Georgians from accessing the ballot box. Whites who felt threatened by the *Smith v. Allwright* decision and betrayed by Governor Arnall for his unwillingness to legally reinstate the white primary ultimately rallied behind Eugene Talmadge’s campaign for governor. Even though he did not hold elected office when the *Smith* ruling was announced in 1944, Talmadge spearheaded Georgia’s movement to preserve the white primary through his 1946 campaign for governor, as evidenced by his racist rhetoric and comprehensive voter suppression scheme.

Taking place amid the wave of postwar racial violence that consumed the region, Georgia’s 1946 Democratic primary had implications that extended beyond state lines. Just months after South Carolina police blinded Isaac Woodard while he was riding a bus clad in his

⁹⁷ “Fruits of Talmadgeism,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 10 July 1946.

⁹⁸ Between 1919 and 1948, the Democratic nominee won 113 out of 114 gubernatorial elections in eleven southern states. For more on one-party states in the South, see V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 407. Key states that in the South, the Democratic primary “is in reality the election.”

military uniform, whites in Georgia terrorized Black veterans in what became two infamous incidents of violent backlash. The killing of Maceo Snipes and the quadruple lynching at Moore's Ford— both of which took place within about a week of the election— elicited national protests and made international headlines. As violence in Georgia peaked, legal disfranchisement efforts took on a more discrete nature than they did in South Carolina in the years immediately following *Smith v. Allwright*. While legal disfranchisement in Georgia went largely unnoticed by the press, investigations conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), NAACP, and the Georgia Commission on Interracial Cooperation uncover the details behind Talmadge's challenge scheme and its relationship to racial violence.⁹⁹ Reframing the 1946 Democratic primary election in Georgia as one of violence *and* disfranchisement offers a more accurate depiction of the history of voter suppression in Georgia— a phenomenon that continues to influence state and local elections more than a half century later.

Until *Smith v. Allwright*, the Georgia Democratic Party restricted membership on the basis of race. Talmadge, who was already at the tail end of a long political career in April 1944, expressed his discontent with the abolition of the white primary in an issue of his weekly, the *Statesman*. "THIS IS A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY," Talmadge declared about a month after the Court's ruling, "AND WE MUST KEEP IT SO!"¹⁰⁰ Local civil rights organizers responded to the decision by attempting to register Black Georgians to vote in the 1944 Democratic primary, but the less than three-month window between the Supreme Court's announcement and the July 4 election date proved to be too narrow for these efforts to yield a substantive impact.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Until political scientist Joseph L. Bernd obtained and made accessible large portions of a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) file pertaining to the 1946 Georgia Democratic primary, details surrounding what Bernd refers to as "the Talmadge plan" were not public. Joseph L. Bernd, "White Supremacy and the Disfranchisement of Blacks in Georgia, 1946," 492-513.

¹⁰⁰ Eugene Talmadge, *The Statesman*, 11 May 1944. See also Novotny, *This Georgia Rising*, 153-54.

¹⁰¹ "Negroes Hear Plan To Ballot," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 14 April 1944, 22.

Likewise, debate over the white primary would not reach its peak until two years later, when African Americans were registering to vote in the Georgia Democratic primary in record numbers. Although Talmadge and other white-supremacist Democrats attempted to “rescue” the white primary by appealing to state and party leadership, the Georgia State Democratic Executive Committee refrained from organizing a legislative suppression scheme similar to Johnston’s party privatization scheme in South Carolina.¹⁰² It was only after the white supremacist faction of the Georgia Democratic Party officially reclaimed power in 1948 that Democratic officials resisted the Supreme Court by implementing state-sanctioned voter suppression.

While his remarks surrounding the ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* were particularly reactionary, Eugene Talmadge was no stranger to taking the controversial stance. Not long after he was first elected governor on the “Roosevelt and Talmadge” ticket in 1932, Talmadge became one of the New Deal’s most vocal opponents at the height of the Great Depression. As governor, Talmadge adopted the white supremacist cause, painting anyone standing in his way as a disruptor of the racial status quo. After suspecting that a dean at the University of Georgia supported integration in 1941, Talmadge dismissed members of the board of regents, fired other university officials, and banned books that he thought condoned racial equality.¹⁰³ In his private life, Talmadge could be violent, especially toward the Black people who worked on his family farm in McRae. During one of Talmadge’s terms as governor, a close friend remembered years later, Talmadge “hit one of his farm niggers up side the head with a pistol and the pistol went off.”¹⁰⁴ Though the gunshot did not kill the Black farmhand, Talmadge gained a reputation in his

¹⁰² “White Primary’s ‘Rescue’ Urged,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1946.

¹⁰³ Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 16-37.

¹⁰⁴ William Anderson, *The Wild Man From Sugar Creek: The Political Career of Eugene Talmadge*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 21.

hometown for using violence to keep African Americans in their place. Race had always been just below the surface for Eugene Talmadge, but the abolition of the white primary helped breathe new life into his populist political agenda.

Unfortunately for Talmadge, Georgia governor Ellis Arnall would soon usher in additional electoral reforms at the state level. Even as Arnall professed support for segregation and downplayed racial issues, his governorship came to symbolize Southern liberalism due to his extensive record as a reformer.¹⁰⁵ When Arnall signed into law a bill abolishing the poll tax in 1945, Talmadge was still seething over the thought of losing the white primary. Arnall succeeded in staying away from racial controversies for his entire political career and passed on the opportunity to mobilize statewide opposition to *Smith v. Allwright*. Continued discussion of preserving the white primary against the orders of the Supreme Court, however, prompted Arnall to take a solid stance against white supremacy in the name of good government. Speaking out against Talmadge-style attempts at circumventing the federal judiciary, Arnall proclaimed that he would not be “a party to any subterfuge or ‘scheme’ designed to nullify the orders of the courts.”¹⁰⁶ Arnall refrained from using divisive rhetoric and made no mention of race, yet Eugene Talmadge still saw Arnall’s reformist approach as a direct challenge to the white supremacist order. Talmadge even framed the ratification of a new state Constitution as a Washington ploy to meddle in Georgia affairs.¹⁰⁷

Though electoral reform defined Arnall’s first and only term as governor, the county unit system remained a powerful tool unique to Georgia that helped seal Talmadge’s victory in 1946,

¹⁰⁵ Randall L. Patton, “A Southern Liberal and the Politics of Anti-Colonialism: The Governorship of Ellis Arnall,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 74 (Winter, 1990): 609-18.

¹⁰⁶ John Couric, “Let Negroes Vote— Arnall Refuses To Join In Any Subterfuge,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 5 April 1946. See also Patton, “A Southern Liberal and the Politics of Anti-Colonialism,” 619.

¹⁰⁷ Eugene Talmadge, *The Statesman*, 26 April 1945. Talmadge wrote that “this proposed new constitution came from Washington... and they are TRYING TO RAM IT DOWN OUR THROATS HERE IN GEORGIA!” See also Novotny, *This Georgia Rising*, 128.

and with it, the future of disfranchisement. Applying only to primary elections, the county unit system was designed to maintain rural power by mandating the allocation of unit votes to counties based upon population density. Each county received two unit-votes per representative in the state house; the eight counties with the highest populations received six votes each, while the thirty next most populous counties got four unit votes. The 121 remaining counties each received two votes, and the candidate to secure a plurality of the popular vote would win the all of the county's unit votes. A candidate needed to obtain a majority of the state's 410 unit votes to win the election. That one vote from rural Quitman County was worth 38 times that of the more densely populated Fulton County inflated Talmadge's traditional base of support in rural areas.¹⁰⁸ Talmadge was a fierce advocate of the county unit system, which would define Georgia elections until the Supreme Court eventually ruled it unconstitutional in 1963.

By the time Talmadge announced his candidacy on May 18, 1946, James V. Carmichael and Eurith D. Rivers had already kicked off their respective campaigns. A compelling speaker and seasoned state legislator, Carmichael was committed to carrying on Arnall's legacy of Southern liberalism and good government, eventually securing the former governor's endorsement. Carmichael was an executive from the Atlanta area, and his candidacy represented a first among Georgia's urban elite in years. By coming out strong against Klan violence and his opponent's race-baiting, Carmichael proved to be the favored candidate among a large portion of newly registered Black voters.¹⁰⁹ But Rivers, who had more promising financial backing than chances of winning, split the anti-Talmadge faction. Talmadge's lily-white base still proved to be no match for Carmichael, who comfortably defeated Talmadge by a margin of 16,000 votes. On

¹⁰⁸ Data from the 1940 Census, taken from the United States Census Bureau "Census of Population and Housing," 1940.

¹⁰⁹ "Indicate Most Negro Votes Cast for James Carmichael: Spokesman for Talmadge Makes 'Explanation,'" *The Atlanta Daily World*, 21 July 1946.

October 9, 1946, however, Eugene Talmadge accepted the Democratic nomination at the party convention in Macon after receiving 96 more unit votes than Carmichael.¹¹⁰ The county unit system—the protection of which soon became as important to Talmadge as restoring the white primary—won Talmadge the election against the will of the majority. Rivers and Hoke O’Kelley, a fourth candidate, trailed far behind.

Convenient victories in key counties were not the natural result of Talmadge’s effective campaigning or explosive rhetoric, but rather the calculated outcome of a comprehensive voter suppression campaign. One week before election day, Theron Caudle, the assistant attorney general of the United States, instructed the FBI to open an investigation after receiving complaints that supporters of Eugene Talmadge were attempting “to bring about a wholesale purge of negroes from the registration lists irrespective of their qualifications under Georgia law.”¹¹¹ Joseph Bernd, who wrote extensively on electoral politics in Georgia, uncovered nearly 750 pages of records from this investigation, and concluded that Talmadge and his close advisers carried out a county-by-county purge of African American voters through the use of challenge forms. These forms allowed citizens to legally challenge the status of a registered voter whom they had reason to believe did not meet the necessary qualifications pursuant to the Georgia

¹¹⁰ Joseph L. Bernd, *Grass Roots Politics in Georgia: The County Unit System and the Importance of the Individual Voting Community in Bi-Factional Elections, 1942-1954* (Atlanta: Emory University Research Committee, 1960), 11.

¹¹¹ Edward T. Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects: Racial Discrimination in Registration of Negro Voters, State of Georgia,” 24 October 1946, folder 1, file 44-114, FBI.

APPLING COUNTY

TO THE BOARD OF REGISTRARS OF SAID COUNTY:

Now comes the undersigned, citizens of said county, and challenges the right of registration of *Francis D. [unclear]*, whose name appears upon the list of registered voters furnished by the tax collector to the Board of Registrars of said county, and files this contest as to the qualifications of said registered voter, and for ground of contest and challenge says;

1. Said registrant is not a citizen of this state and of the United States 18 years old or upwards, and will not be such citizen at the time of holding the general election in 1946.
2. Said registrant has not resided in the State of Georgia for one year next preceding the general election in 1946, and will not have so resided at the time of said general election.
3. Said registrant has not resided in APPLING county six months next preceding said general election and will not have so resided at the time of said general election.
4. Said registrant is not a person of good character who understands the duties and obligations of citizenship under a republican form of government.
5. Said registrant cannot correctly read in the English language any paragraph of the Constitution of the United States or of the State of Georgia and correctly write the same in such English language when read to said registrant by one of the registrars; and said registrant is not unable to comply with said requirements solely because of physical disability.
6. Said registrant cannot understand and give a reasonable interpretation of a paragraph of the constitution of the United States or of this state, when read to said registrant by any one of the registrars.

WHEREFORE, contestants and challengers pray that this board of registrars notify said registered voter of this challenge and contest and pass upon the same, and that a copy hereof be furnished to said registrant at least one day before the same is heard, and that if this contest and challenge be sustained, the name of said registrant be stricken from the list of voters and from the voters' book.

This, May July 1, 1946

[Signature]

Appling County challenge form, July 1, 1946. | Group II, Series B, Legal File "Voting, 1940-1955," NAACP Papers.

Code.¹¹² Challengers could cite one of five reasons for which the county board should disqualify a voter, including failure to meet the necessary citizenship, age, and literacy requirements.¹¹³

Extensive FBI reports on over ninety counties suggest that in the weeks between the voter registration deadline and election day, the Talmadge campaign printed and distributed thousands of forms that county leaders could use to facilitate the striking of registered Black voters from the rolls. As election day grew closer, leaders in what were mainly majority-Black counties all over the state found large packages filled with challenge forms on their porches or at their offices.¹¹⁴ Whether Eugene Talmadge and his son and close adviser, Herman, alerted their

¹¹² Bernd, "White Supremacy and the Disfranchisement of Blacks in Georgia, 1946," 494-95.

¹¹³ Ibid, 495. Other factors that citizens could have used to challenge a voter pursuant to the 1945 Georgia Constitution include a voter's failure to meet qualifications such as: the one-year residency requirement, adherence to the "good character" clause, or possess a proper understanding and ability to provide a "reasonable interpretation" of the United States Constitution.

¹¹⁴ Kassinger, "Unknown Subjects," 47.

contacts before sending them packages depended upon the situation. Some unsuspecting recipients who wanted no part in the scheme burned the challenge forms and the accompanying instruction sheet.¹¹⁵ Regardless, those who received packages of challenge forms were under the impression that they were to be used to systematically challenge African American voters.

Talmadge and his supporters clung to the illusion that their brand of suppression was legal. In a speech at the Democratic Convention in Macon, Herman Talmadge was candid about his father's "legal purging of the voters list." Though the suppression campaign and FBI investigation remained covert, Herman Talmadge already felt he had to defend his father's record. Any federal efforts to curb the suppression campaign, Talmadge proclaimed, was merely a ploy to "change our Southern traditions and heritages."¹¹⁶ No number of reassurances on the part of Herman Talmadge could erase the reality that the assistant attorney general of the United States had instructed the FBI to investigate allegations that the campaign was depriving African Americans of their civil rights. Talmadge could attack "outside agitators" and the federal government for meddling in state affairs during speeches, but that would not protect even the highest ranking Talmadge campaign officials from interviews with federal agents. Uncovering the details surrounding Talmadge's sweeping voter suppression campaign is necessary in order to understand the extent to which Talmadge would go to stifle Black political participation.

Most of the counties that were implicated in the Talmadge plan utilized similar suppression techniques, though the specific details differed slightly. In Appling County, T. V. Williams, a prominent Talmadge supporter, colluded with members of the board of registrars to obtain a list of registered voters after the office closed one evening. Williams copied the names of the Black voters *en masse* onto challenge forms that had already been filled out and signed by

¹¹⁵ Kassinger, "Unknown Subjects," 193.

¹¹⁶ "Acceptance Speech of Eugene Talmadge," 9 October 1946, folder 2, file 44-114, FBI.

other Talmadge supporters. The day before county officials held hearings to determine the legitimacy of each challenge, Eugene Talmadge gave a speech at the Appling County Court House. After the speech, a member of the board of registrars asked Talmadge directly whether the challenge plan was legal. “Strike them off,” Talmadge allegedly instructed the board member. “There is nothing they can do about it.”¹¹⁷ Talmadge won Appling's two county-unit votes with a comfortable popular-vote majority, though a timely federal injunction ordered the local board to restore the names of all 620 voters.¹¹⁸ The same judge also ruled against purging attempts in Atkinson and Coffee counties, undermining the Talmadge campaign's subsequent attempts to bolster the legal merits of the challenge scheme.

Other counties where officials utilized challenge forms in nearly identical ways went without judicial oversight. While giving a speech in Wilcox County, Eugene Talmadge asked the crowd how many Black Georgians were registered to vote. One of the audience members replied, loud enough for the candidate to hear, that there were about 650. That number was too high, Talmadge allegedly called back, suggesting that no more than about 50 African Americans should be allowed to vote. County officials responded to Talmadge's offhand remark by challenging 598 out of the 600 registered Black voters. At the hearings, officials asked African Americans questions ranging from the definitions of a bill of attainder and ex post facto to the name of a white person who “asked” them to register. “If [a] negro registrant showed the slightest hesitancy in replying to a question or request to read something... [or] made a wrong pronunciation of a legal term,” the FBI report on Wilcox County reads, “he or she was disqualified.”¹¹⁹ Only sixty African Americans were spared from the mass purging in Wilcox

¹¹⁷ Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects,” 2-8.

¹¹⁸ Bernd, *Grass Roots Politics in Georgia*, 71.

¹¹⁹ Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects,” 387-88.

County— just as Talmadge had suggested before the crowd in Rochelle weeks earlier.¹²⁰ Just east of Wilcox, officials similarly asked many of the 87 registered Black voters in Bacon County— all of whom were challenged by J. W. Story, a candidate for the state legislature— how many rooms there were in the state capitol. The FBI determined that Story, like officials in Appling County, challenged African American voters *en masse* and “without having personal knowledge of individual qualifications.”¹²¹ Unlike Talmadge, who was committed to maintaining the public facade that the purpose of his challenge scheme was to protect the integrity of the ballot, Story was transparent with his motives. Story admitted to FBI agents that he was running for a position in the state legislature “on a white supremacy platform, in a white man’s election, in a white man’s country,” and claimed that he would bar all Black people from voting if he could.¹²² Though Story refused to directly implicate Talmadge in the Bacon County purging scheme, FBI agents confirmed that the challenge forms he used were identical to those Talmadge had sent to supporters throughout the state.

Story may have been vocal about his racist intentions and violations of the proper challenge protocol, but there is no indication that the hearings themselves took on a particularly vicious tone. The same cannot be said about the hearings in Colquitt and Worth counties. At one point during the Colquitt County hearings, the chairman of the board of registrars suggested they adjourn due to the unethical nature of the purges, but the chairman’s fellow board members did not have the same judgement. “Bickering among Board members” and an unruly audience further complicated the hearings, according to the FBI report, and the Talmadge supporter who filed 600 challenges against Black voters was ejected from the courtroom.¹²³ Between two and

¹²⁰ Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects,” 392.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 99-103.

three hundred “white spectators”— most of whom were identifiable Talmadge supporters— made jeering remarks and clapped each time the Worth County Board of Registrars disqualified an African American voter.¹²⁴ Registrars claimed that they were intimidated by “veiled threats of violence into disqualifying more Negroes than they ordinarily would have,” and the FBI suspected that local members of the Ku Klux Klan initiated these threats at the request of the county sheriff.¹²⁵ Regardless of who was responsible for threatening violence and cultivating a mob atmosphere, the challenge campaigns in Colquitt and Worth counties illustrate the ways in which violence and suppression were closely intertwined.

Violence also manifested itself in more explicit ways throughout the primary season; vigilantes repeatedly reinforced the Talmadge plan through violent attacks, many of which fell beyond the scope of the expansive FBI investigation. Nowhere in the 750 pages of FBI records is any mention of the church burning in Soperton, despite multiple reports linking the arson to Talmadgeism.¹²⁶ While reporters and investigators did not document all acts of racial terror equally, the violence that inundated towns from Soperton to Whigham during the election season caught the attention of national civil rights leaders. Dorothy Rogers Tilly, an Atlanta activist who later served on President Harry Truman's Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR), briefed committee members on the state of race relations in Georgia as they prepared to write their landmark 1947 report, *To Secure These Rights*. After receiving an update on the tumultuous primary season about a year after the election, Robert K. Carr, the PCCR's executive secretary, responded that

¹²⁴ Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects,” 403.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Fruits of Talmadgeism,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 10 July 1946; “Furious Persons, Talmadge-Fired, Destroy Church,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 11 July 1946; “Talmadge Clan Destroys Church,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 July 1946.

“there is no doubt that Georgia is passing through a reign of terror and that shocking things are happening.”¹²⁷

The reign of terror hit Grady County the evening before the primary, when night riders broke into the home of Black residents Dan Herrell and his brother, Perry. Dan Herrell told FBI agents that he had been asleep in his bed when he heard a gunshot and someone calling his brother’s name. By the time he got out of bed, one of the masked night riders had pushed the door in and entered his home. The white man grabbed Dan, who began pleading for his life. “We don’t want to kill you,” the white men assured, “we want to talk to Perry.” Once the night riders got ahold of Perry, they told him to stay away from the polls, and advised him to tell his “daddy” and “colored friends” to do the same.¹²⁸ Other African Americans in Grady County encountered the same group of night riders. Tom Cloud, who a neighbor described as “a prominent negro in town,” was visited by hooded men who fired their guns and warned him not to vote.¹²⁹ As election day grew closer, violence became a way for Talmadge supporters to keep the African Americans whose votes they failed to purge away from the polls.

Sometimes the same individuals who challenged Black voters in court traded their suits and ties for shotguns and hoods. In Jackson County, about 300 miles north of Grady County, the Talmadge supporters who were in charge of filing challenge forms also fired shots into the homes of African Americans, explicitly warning several Black registrants that “they had better stay away from the polls.”¹³⁰ In Meriwether County, seven white men, who the FBI identified as Talmadge supporters, burned a cross in the Black section of Manchester the night before the

¹²⁷ Robert K. Carr to Dorothy Rogers Tilly, 25 July 1947, Box 1, Folder 6, Dorothy Rogers Tilly Papers, Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Book Library, Atlanta, GA.

¹²⁸ Rollin A. Stanley, “Unknown Subjects: Racial Discrimination in Registration of Negro Voters (Shooting of Negro Homes) Grady County, State of Georgia,” 20 September 1946, folder 2, file 44-114, FBI.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁰ Kassinger, “Unknown Subjects,” 207.

election. A mob of white men armed with sticks and rocks formed a picket line at the Meriwether County polling place the next day, confronting the African Americans who were not deterred by the previous night's cross burning. FBI investigators estimated that the mob prevented approximately 52 Black people from voting.¹³¹ Even after African American registrants proved their qualifications in the courtroom, violence and intimidation still jeopardized their right to vote.

In counties where Black voters faced both legal challenges and extralegal violence, the Talmadge plan took on a heightened level of intensity. Those traveling on the highway from Whigham to Cairo the night before the election would have witnessed the potency of racial tensions firsthand. A poster that read "\$25 reward for the first negro that votes" was nailed to a sign post on the side of the road, and the red lettering was visible enough for drivers to see from their cars.¹³² For Talmadge supporters and the African Americans whose civil rights they sought to trample, the election was no longer about the man on the ticket or his demagogic speeches. Rather, the election ultimately boiled down to a simple question that legislators had seemingly resolved when the Georgia General Assembly ratified the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870: Should African Americans have a voice in state politics?

Much like Democrats who fought to restore their rule in Southern states after Reconstruction, supporters of Eugene Talmadge believed they could redeem the state of Georgia from a short-lived era of racial reform.¹³³ Talmadge invoked Lost Cause mythology to fortify his case against Black enfranchisement throughout his campaign. "Once before our forefathers faced this same grave situation here in Georgia following the War Between the States," Talmadge

¹³¹ Kassinger, "Unknown Subjects," 264-70.

¹³² Stanley, "Unknown Subjects," 4-35.

¹³³ For more on the end of Reconstruction, see Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

expressed during an address. “They did not take the defeatist attitudes of... the candidates opposing me for governor in this race.”¹³⁴ Nearly seventy years after the last federal troops withdrew from the South following the inauguration of President Rutherford B. Hayes, whites were still fighting the same war to keep African Americans out of politics. In a radio address the night before the election, Talmadge offered his final plea to voters by comparing his campaign to that of Alfred Colquitt, the Confederate general who ran for governor in 1876. “You are going to the polls to decide the bitterest campaign for Governor in Georgia history,” Talmadge remarked, “except one.” Alluding to the race between Colquitt and Jonathan Norcross, Talmadge pined for the days “when the white people of Georgia wrested the state Government from the carpetbaggers who swarmed into Georgia on the heels of Sherman’s army.”¹³⁵ Just as the election of Colquitt put an end to Reconstruction, electing Talmadge was a way for white Georgians to stymie a brief moment of postwar progress and preserve white supremacy.

As with the end of Reconstruction, violence persisted in the wake of Talmadge’s victory on July 17. The day after Maceo Snipes cast his ballot, a white man shot him in the back on his grandfather’s front lawn. Snipes, a World War II veteran, was the only Black person to vote in Taylor County.¹³⁶ The next week, a white mob killed George and Mae Murray Dorsey alongside Roger and Dorothy Malcolm. The mob riddled the bodies of the two married couples with bullets on the side of a dirt road near the Moore’s Ford Bridge in Monroe, and officials who discovered the remains near the Apalachee River reported that the perpetrators had mutilated the corpses beyond the point of recognition. Though Roger Malcolm’s alleged involvement in the stabbing

¹³⁴ Charles S. Bullock, Scott E. Buchanan, and Ronald Keith Gaddie, *The Three Governors Controversy: Skullduggery, Machinations, and the Decline of Georgia’s Progressive Politics*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 86.

¹³⁵ “White Primary Theme of Talmadge Broadcast,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 17 July 1946.

¹³⁶ Hank Klibanoff and Erica Sterling, “Maceo Snipes: A Man whose Death Inspired the Teenager who Led the Movement,” <https://coldcases.emory.edu/maceo-snipes/> (accessed April 10, 2020).

of his white overseer ostensibly provoked the attack, it does not tell the whole story. The quadruple lynching, writers for the *Atlanta Daily World* argued, was “clearly the result of the race hatred incited during the recent primary election.”¹³⁷ An anonymous Southerner reaffirmed suspicions that the election influenced the mob’s actions in a letter addressed to “The Two Southern Members” of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, which Truman established in the months following the massacre. “We admit that the murder of 4 negroes in Georgia was a dreadful affair,” the author concedes, “but the state of affairs was so desperate, something had to be done.”¹³⁸ That whites felt empowered to carry out such an extreme act of violence is a testament to the climate of terror that emerged from Talmadge’s successful campaign.

News of the killings spread quickly, the gory details searing the minds of readers from New York to Los Angeles. Civil rights advocates from around the country responded to the violence by organizing pickets in front of the White House, urging President Truman to take a firm stance against racial violence.¹³⁹ Many of the picketers explicitly referenced racial terror in Georgia throughout the demonstrations, and one woman held a sign that read “Talmadge... Pittsburgh [is] coming after you.”¹⁴⁰ That the Georgia lynchings made the pages of *Trud*, a popular Russian publication, further heightened the stakes for Truman; in order to protect America’s image abroad, the federal government would need to quell racial violence in the deep South.¹⁴¹ The outbreak of racial violence also left a 17-year-old student at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr., feeling disillusioned. In a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*,

¹³⁷ “Drastic Action Is Needed,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, 30 July 1946.

¹³⁸ Anonymous to The Two Southern Members Of The Civil Rights Committee, 8 February 1948, Box 1, Folder 7, Dorothy Rogers Tilly Papers.

¹³⁹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 20; “Georgia Mob of 20 Men Massacres 2 Negroes, Wives; One Was Ex-GI,” *The New York Times*, 27 July 1946; “Mob in Georgia Kills Two Negro Men and Wives,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1946.

¹⁴⁰ Unknown, 7 August 1946, Washington Star Photo Collection, DC Public Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁴¹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 18-21.

King criticized “a certain class of people” who tapped into deeply held racial anxieties as a means to “obscure the real question of rights and opportunities.”¹⁴² This violence— the fruits of Talmadgeism— gained recognition around the globe and helped galvanize a new generation of civil rights activists.

As racial tensions continued to rise in the wake of a violent primary season, Eugene Talmadge’s health began to rapidly decline. Talmadge died on the morning of December 21, 1946, of acute hepatitis coupled with cirrhosis of the liver— a common fate for lifelong heavy drinkers. Because Talmadge had officially become the governor-elect, but was not yet sworn in as governor, a drama unfolded as three men each made claims to the governorship.¹⁴³ While supporters paid their final respects to “the best Governor Georgia ever had,” African Americans across the nation remembered Talmadge as a race-baiting demagogue.¹⁴⁴ “He was a forceful speaker on the hysterical side,” a Black editor in the *Cleveland Call and Post* commented, “and his voice affected his listeners in the same fashion as Hitler’s ravings did the German nation.”¹⁴⁵ In the immediate aftermath of his death, neither whites nor African Americans remembered Talmadge for anything more than his vibrant brand of politics. But as Talmadge’s body lay in state under the Gold Dome, observant passersby would have noticed the wreath marked

¹⁴² M. L. King, Jr., “Letters to the Editor,” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 6 August 1946.

¹⁴³ Eugene Talmadge’s death sparked what later became known as the Three Governors Controversy. Melvin Thompson, who was elected to serve as lieutenant governor under Eugene Talmadge, claimed to be the natural successor. Before the general election, when Eugene Talmadge’s health began to decline, Herman Talmadge orchestrated a write-in campaign in the event that his father died before taking office. Herman Talmadge and his advisors planned to utilize a little-known clause in the Georgia constitution that empowered the General Assembly to vote into office the candidate with the most write-in votes. Outgoing Governor Ellis Arnall, who was a racial moderate and believer in good government, also invoked a provision of the state constitution that would allow him to remain in office until a successor was sworn in. After months of uncertainty that culminated in a ruling by the Supreme Court of Georgia, Melvin Thompson was sworn in as governor. For more on the Three Governors Controversy, see Bullock, Buchanan, and Gaddie, *The Three Governors Controversy*.

¹⁴⁴ Bill Boring, “Pastor Chooses Twain’s ‘Goodnight’ To Bid Eugene Talmadge Farewell,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 24 December 1946.

¹⁴⁵ “Race Baiting Gene Talmadge Dies in Georgia,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 28 December 1946.

“KKKK”— or Knights of the Ku Klux Klan— among the bouquets of flowers surrounding the casket.¹⁴⁶ Even in death, Talmadge’s charisma could not completely mask his legacy of violence.

Though Talmadge died before even serving a day as governor, his campaign represents a major turning point in Georgia politics and the history of voter suppression. Political scientists Charles S. Bullock, Scott E. Buchanan, and Ronald Keith Gaddie argue that the 1946 Georgia Democratic primary “can be seen as the event in which the conservative forces in Georgia consolidated their power.”¹⁴⁷ While conservative Democrats occupied the Governor’s Mansion for nearly twenty years— putting up a strong resistance campaign to the desegregation of schools after the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*— Talmadge’s victory clearly represents more than a small partisan shift within the context of Georgia politics. The abolition of the white primary and subsequent era of postwar racial reform similarly threatened white supremacy in other southern states, and segregationists throughout the South looked to Eugene Talmadge's campaign as a model for success. One reporter claimed in an editorial published about a year after Talmadge’s death that the eyes of South Carolinians committed to maintaining the old racial hierarchy "rest nervously and inquiringly on Georgia."¹⁴⁸ Whites in power had been suppressing Black votes throughout the South since Reconstruction, but Eugene Talmadge helped revolutionize the process.

Back in Georgia, Eugene Talmadge revived anti-Black politics. Herman Talmadge continued the family dynasty, first as a two-term governor before serving a lengthy career in the United States Senate. Though the FBI investigation died with Eugene Talmadge, the NAACP began to more closely monitor allegations of civil rights violations in Georgia after the 1946

¹⁴⁶ Laura Wexler, *Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America*, (New York: Scribner, 2003), 192.

¹⁴⁷ Bullock, Buchanan, and Gaddie, *The Three Governors Controversy*, 124.

¹⁴⁸ Andrew Simkins, “Palmetto State: White Supremacy Candidate Seen As Having Slim Chance In South Carolina,” *New Journal and Guide*, 18 January 1947.

primary and received multiple complaints from both Black and white Georgians that voter suppression remained alive and well. C. L. Jordan, a white man from Americus, reported an incident of voter intimidation from an adjacent county's local election in January 1948. According to Jordan, a state legislator guarded the polling place with a shotgun and announced that "if a Nigger votes in this election, he'll be a dead Nigger."¹⁴⁹ The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that vigilantes burned large crosses in three counties on the night before the statewide Democratic primary the next fall, and men dressed in hoods allegedly left a miniature casket on one African American man's doorstep.¹⁵⁰ Race was the most pervasive force going into the 1948 Democratic primary election, but unlike his father, Herman Talmadge won the governorship in a sweeping victory.¹⁵¹

Uncovering the precise tactics that Talmadge and his supporters employed to stifle Black political participation illuminates the long-term implications of disfranchisement since *Smith v. Allwright*, as well as the ways in which postwar voter suppression in Georgia differed from that of South Carolina. Eugene Talmadge knew that the time had passed for his antiquated racial populism—the electorate was increasingly Black, and Ellis Arnall's liberalism was popular among whites. To win, Talmadge had to get whites on his side and African Americans to stay away from the polls. Racially charged rhetoric may have been an effective way to rally a strong base of rural whites who feared civil rights reforms, but the Talmadge campaign would not have been nearly as successful in the absence of mass disfranchisement. The illicit methods Talmadge utilized to suppress the votes of thousands of Black Georgians were reflective of the fractured

¹⁴⁹ C. L. Jordan to National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 29 January 1948, Group II, Series B, Legal File "Voting, 1940-1955," NAACP Papers.

¹⁵⁰ "Talmadge Is Winner in Georgia As White Supremacy Champion: He Defeats Thompson in Governor Race; Klan Is Reported Burning Cross," *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 September 1948.

¹⁵¹ Bernd, *Grass Roots Politics in Georgia*, 12-14.

state of the Democratic Party in Georgia. Because the faction in power when *Smith* was decided came out against evading the Supreme Court's decision, Talmadge and his followers turned to more clandestine methods of suppression in an effort to reinstate the white supremacist order.

Violence and voter suppression were two sides of the same coin in 1946, but Georgia's reign of terror ultimately overshadowed the more mundane disfranchisement tactics that Talmadge and his supporters implemented at the county level. The process of unearthing what whites in power were committed to hiding comes with its own set of challenges, and often yields more questions than it answers. In order to reconstruct Talmadge's covert suppression campaign, historians must look beyond what made headlines during the primary season. Distracted by acts of racial violence, the press failed to award extensive coverage to the challenge hearings that took place in county courtrooms, and Talmadge further avoided public scrutiny by operating under the pretense that the purging scheme was legal. When Talmadge became ill, the FBI dropped its investigation, and the Department of Justice declined to pursue indictments or publish any of the findings. Though Eugene Talmadge's legal challenge scheme was unprecedented, his campaign for governor did not unfold in isolation. In Mississippi, U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo ran a reelection campaign that mirrored the Talmadge campaign in many ways. Together, the two racial-populist campaigns reveal that even candidates who did not hold state office in the immediate aftermath of the *Smith* ruling like Johnston were able to wage delayed responses through the use of legal disfranchisement.

CHAPTER 3

Suppression Through Speech

About two weeks before the 1946 Democratic primary in Mississippi, incumbent U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo reached out to his primary opponents about an issue that transcended politics, even amidst a tightly contested federal election season—the future of white supremacy. In an open letter, which was addressed to each of the four other candidates left in the senate race, Bilbo argued that the *Smith v. Allwright* ruling two years earlier had unfairly opened the door to Black political participation in Mississippi politics.¹⁵² According to Bilbo, the state’s Black population—especially Black soldiers who were exempt from paying poll taxes pursuant to Mississippi law—had been colluding with “Northern negroes, white Socialists, white Communists, and advocates of social and political equity” to undermine the old racial hierarchy in his state.¹⁵³

Though the letter was addressed to his fellow candidates, it was aimed more at the white voting public. Bilbo asked his opponents to “promptly join me in a request to these negroes to refrain from any attempt to participate in our white Democratic nominating primary on July 2.”¹⁵⁴ Although Bilbo was not formally addressing his white supporters, he sent them a clear message when he requested that his Democratic opponents join him “and other white people of the State” in making “every effort” to prevent African Americans from casting their ballots in the Democratic primary. “Any straddling or dodging or equivocation on this important issue,” Bilbo

¹⁵² “Veteran Beaten; Bilbo Urges Violence to Stop Negro Vote,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 June 1946, 14.

¹⁵³ Theodore Bilbo to Honorables Tom Q. Ellis, Ross A. Collins, Nelson Trimble Levings, and Frank Harper, 17 June 1946, box 992, folder 12, Theodore G. Bilbo papers, McCain Library & Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

threatened, “must necessarily be construed as a desire on your part not only to secure the negro vote in your campaign but an open approval of negro voting and negro control of the political life of our state.”¹⁵⁵ By making the letter public, Bilbo appealed to white-supremacist hardliners and created distance between himself and the rest of the crowded field by emphasizing his own commitment to white supremacy while undermining that of his opponents by comparison. Most significantly, however, Bilbo gave the white electorate clear instructions to engage in “*every effort*” necessary to prevent Black citizens from voting come July 2 (emphasis added).

Bilbo won the election handily, though his victory was not without well-deserved criticism and an unprecedented challenge by the U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures.¹⁵⁶ Over the course of the election cycle, Black activists collected reports of voting rights violations against the Bilbo campaign much like the NAACP did in Georgia. Despite the similarities between the complaints in Mississippi to those in Georgia, Assistant Attorney General Theron Caudle declined to open an investigation into the Bilbo campaign due to “insufficient evidence to warrant prosecution under the Civil Rights Statutes.”¹⁵⁷ Instead, Caudle suggested that Black Mississippians should seek redress through the same state officials responsible for the voting rights violations in question. Though Caudle did not provide any additional context behind his decision not to investigate the Bilbo campaign, Black leaders suspected that the Justice Department was “double dealing” by deferring to the state of Mississippi on a matter involving the violation of rights that were clearly guaranteed by the United States Constitution and subject to federal jurisdiction.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Theodore Bilbo to Honorables Tom Q. Ellis, Ross A. Collins, Nelson Trimble Levings, and Frank Harper, 17 June 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁵⁶ “Executive Committee Puts Election Protest On File; Declares Party Nominees,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 7 July 1946, 5.

¹⁵⁷ Assistant Attorney General Theron L. Caudle to Robert L. Carter, 17 July 1946, folder 001517-009-001, Group II, Series B, Legal File: Voting, 1940-1955, NAACP Papers, and Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 114.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Ellis Byrd to Robert L. Carter, 30 July 1946, NAACP Papers.

After the Department of Justice refused to address the allegations of civil rights violations against Bilbo, Black voters in Mississippi successfully appealed to the U.S. Senate, arguing that Bilbo's racist rhetoric and calls for violence created a climate of intimidation that prevented thousands of African Americans from voting in the July 2 primary. Fueled by Republican efforts to diminish the national Democratic reputation, the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures held an unprecedented set of hearings in Jackson, collected testimony from dozens of African Americans who experienced violence or intimidation at the polls, and sent investigators from the Department of Justice to conduct a preliminary inquiry in Mississippi. In doing so, members of the U.S. Senate grappled with what Black enfranchisement really meant in the post-*Smith v. Allwright* South.¹⁵⁹

Though the special committee held that Bilbo's conduct was lawful and ultimately permitted him to take his seat in the Senate, its findings reveal both the ways in which political rhetoric fuels violence and the overlap between legal and extralegal forms of voter suppression. Several senators on the committee made the compelling case that Bilbo's June 17 letter, as well as his campaign's other incendiary tactics aimed at deterring Black voters during the 1946 primary season, violated federal law.¹⁶⁰ While Bilbo maintained that his racist speeches constituted "free speech," coverage from the campaign trail suggest that Bilbo regularly made explicit appeals for racial violence and used language that clearly contradicted the spirit of

¹⁵⁹ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 114.

¹⁶⁰ Specifically, members of the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures believed Bilbo's letter to Tom Q. Ellis, Ross A. Collins, Nelson Trimble Levings, and Frank Harper violated Section 19 of the United States Criminal Code entitled "Conspiracy to Injure Persons in Exercise of Civil Rights," which states: "If two or more persons conspire to injure, oppress, threaten, or intimidate any citizen in the free exercise or enjoyment of any right or privilege secured to him by the Constitution or laws of the United States... they shall be fined not more than \$5,000 and imprisoned not more than ten years, and shall, moreover, be thereafter ineligible to any office, or place of honor, profit, or trust created by the Constitution or laws of the United States." Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, box 984, folder 6, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

federal civil rights laws and Supreme Court precedent.¹⁶¹ Further, the Black Mississippians who were courageous enough to register and vote despite the threats of violence, the Senate committee members concluded, “were prevented from registering by artifice, procrastination, deceit, and outright refusal to register them” as a direct result of Bilbo’s speeches.¹⁶² The Southern Democrats on the committee did not accept these findings, however, and those sympathetic to Bilbo’s case prevailed by the time the hearings ended on January 3, 1947. While Bilbo was never held accountable for attempting to disfranchise nearly half of Mississippi’s eligible voters, the committee’s investigation uncovers instances of violence and voter suppression that took place over the course of the 1946 primary season in great detail.¹⁶³ The reports reveal a causal relationship between Bilbo’s words on the stump and specific incidents of racial violence and voter intimidation that took place across the state of Mississippi on election day.

The Senate investigation also provides insight into the Democratic elite’s response to the federal abolition of the white primary in Mississippi. Like Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, Bilbo was an early New Dealer turned racial demagogue who played a prominent role in the fight to reinstate the white primary. Because neither Talmadge nor Bilbo held state office when the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Smith*, they were in weaker positions to legally resist the abolition of the white primary than South Carolina’s sitting governor, Olin Johnston, who could work to suppress the Black vote via executive action and coordination with the state legislature. Yet even without this legal authority, Bilbo believed that he and other white

¹⁶¹ Statement of Theodore G. Bilbo of the State of Mississippi in Response to Complaint and Charges Filed Against Him, 5 December 1946, box 984, folder 5, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁶² Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁶³ In 1940, African Americans made up 49.2 percent of Mississippi’s total population. For more on racial demographics of Mississippi, see Mark Lowry II, “Population and Race in Mississippi, 1940-1960,” Vol. 61, No. 3 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (September 1971): 576-588.

Democrats running for office could protect the white primary by threatening Black voters with violence, and his campaign revolved around appeals for racial terrorism. Indeed, racial violence was such a prevalent force in Mississippi at the time that most state officials did not believe that the *Smith* decision would pose a legitimate threat to the white primary until the Senate investigation more than two years later shed light on Black organizing efforts. As Robert Mickey argues, Mississippi Democrats only “began to deliberate seriously about their response to *Smith v. Allwright*” after the Senate committee hearings brought local civil rights efforts to the attention of the white Democratic elite.¹⁶⁴

While the state’s rulers may not have noticed, Black Mississippians had been calling for an end to white supremacy years before the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*. World War II marked a period of social and economic disruption in the state. Black participation in the armed forces and military industry contributed to an increase in NAACP chapters across the state. This wartime recruiting drive culminated in a 1946 state conference. Aside from voting rights, branches worked to improve the salaries and conditions of Black teachers and responded to the many instances of police brutality against Black veterans.¹⁶⁵ To be sure, Black organizers in Mississippi often faced greater challenges than their counterparts in other Southern states. Mississippi lynch mobs were responsible for about forty percent of United States lynching deaths during the 1930s, and barriers such as the poll tax— which had recently been strengthened along with other voting restrictions by the state legislature in 1939— made voting rights seem even more out of reach in Mississippi than in other parts of the region.¹⁶⁶ Still,

¹⁶⁴ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 115.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶⁶ Ward, *Defending White Democracy*, 22-23, and “High Court Strengthens Corrupt Practices Act,” *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, 18 April 1939, 12.

civil rights activism was beginning to expand in the Magnolia State by the time the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Smith*.

White Democrats in Mississippi, however, were not as concerned about postwar Black activism as their counterparts in South Carolina and Georgia— and as a result, they delayed legal or legislative attempts to reinstate the white primary were delayed.¹⁶⁷ Some officials such as state senator Fielding Wright, who was then planning a gubernatorial run, attempted to carry out a state-level response to *Smith v. Allwright* similar to Johnston’s legislative maneuver in South Carolina. However, because of Mississippi Democrats’ apathy toward Black organizing, these efforts would not gain momentum until years later. Other white-supremacist Democrats such as Congressman John E. Rankin, an infamous Southern demagogue in the House, verbally condemned “the recent blunder of the supreme court [sic],” but did not take or advocate for tangible steps toward nullifying the Court’s orders.¹⁶⁸ Instead, the general consensus among Mississippi’s leading Democrats was to assume that the state’s sociopolitical culture alone would sufficiently keep the white primary intact while Democrats in other parts of the region put forth legal challenges to *Smith*. Sitting Governor Thomas Bailey remained fairly quiet on the issue, and an editorial in the *Clarion-Ledger*, the state’s leading daily, an unabashedly white-supremacist Jackson daily, argued that “Mississippi legislators will be wise indeed to delay any hasty and drastic action involving amendment or repeal of our primary election laws until the outcome of the South Carolina and Georgia tests is revealed.”¹⁶⁹ While it was years in the making, the fight to reinstate the white primary in Mississippi did not completely assume control

¹⁶⁷ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 115.

¹⁶⁸ “Rankin Scores Court For Negro Vote Rule,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 6 April 1944, 1.

¹⁶⁹ “Mississippi Should Await Outcome Of These Court Tests,” *Clarion-Ledger*, 23 February 1947, 6.

over state politics until African Americans attempted to register and vote in the 1946 Democratic primary.

As the primary cycle geared up in spring 1946, eyes in Mississippi and across the nation turned toward Theodore Bilbo's U.S. Senate reelection campaign in the state's first federal election since *Smith v. Allwright*. Bilbo, a two-term incumbent who had already earned a national reputation as one of the South's most virulent white supremacists, was running to keep his Senate seat amidst an unusually crowded field. Political analysts considered former congressman Ross Collins and Mississippi Supreme Court clerk Tom Q. Ellis— whose last-minute entrance into the race weakened Bilbo's momentum in the weeks leading up to the election— to be Bilbo's most promising contenders. Both Collins and Ellis, like most elected officials in Mississippi, believed in white supremacy and were committed to preserving the old racial hierarchy. Yet their campaigns, which emphasized decades of experience and political integrity, contrasted Bilbo's cult of personality. "They want light, not heat; facts, not factionalism," an editorial in the *Clarion-Ledger* surmised of Bilbo's opponents.¹⁷⁰ After a controversial election season that included accusations of tax evasion against Bilbo and personal attacks from all sides, Bilbo won a majority of votes in all parts of the state— his views on race even helped him carry the Delta region, the historical base of his opposition.¹⁷¹

Bilbo's racial populist ideology, which had become as discernable as his signature red necktie over the course of his campaign, was not the only factor contributing to his big victory. During the months of May and June 1946, Bilbo traversed the state giving speeches that called upon the "red blooded Anglo-Saxon" men of Mississippi to prevent the mere 5,000 African Americans who qualified to vote from casting their ballots on election day— and many white

¹⁷⁰ "Six Senatorial Candidates Wooing Mississippi Democrats," *Clarion-Ledger*, 5 May 1946.

¹⁷¹ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 114.

Mississippians made good on these appeals.¹⁷² Throughout the summer, Black organizers collected witness testimony and submitted formal complaints of voting rights violations against the Bilbo campaign to the Department of Justice. The voting rights violations were so clear that in the months leading up to the election, Assistant Attorney General Theron Caudle allegedly promised local NAACP officials that “the Department of Justice would thoroughly prosecute any attempts to prevent Negroes from voting.”¹⁷³ In one of the affidavits sent to the Justice Department as part of the formal complaint, V. R. Collier, president of the Gulfport, Mississippi, branch of the NAACP, recounted being beaten by a group of about 15 “poor-looking white men” when he arrived at the city hall to cast his ballot on election day. The police officer stationed at the polling location did nothing to stop the mob from verbally and physically assaulting Collier and his wife.¹⁷⁴ Despite the severity of the growing number of reports against Bilbo supporters in Mississippi, the Department of Justice declined to investigate further due to what federal officials deemed a lack of convincing evidence.¹⁷⁵ Whether the DOJ’s refusal to investigate the claims against Bilbo’s campaign was due to negligence, a lack of resources, white supremacy, or a fear of political retribution cannot be known for sure. Regardless of the precise rationale, the decision is reflective of the federal government’s fickle relationship to civil rights. Throughout the rest of the summer, organizers continued to collect compelling testimony documenting instances of voting rights violations, though these efforts were to no avail.

Determined to achieve some form of redress, activists affiliated with the Mississippi Progressive Voters League, a veteran’s organization that promoted civil rights, turned to the U.S.

¹⁷² “Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ ‘Any Means’ to Bar Negroes From Voting,” *The New York Times*, 23 June 1946, 30, and Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, 48.

¹⁷³ “Memorandum to Mr. White from Robert L. Carter,” 18 June 1946, NAACP Papers.

¹⁷⁴ Incident report, V. R. Collier, Gulf Port, Harrison County, Mississippi, 2 July 1946, NAACP Papers.

¹⁷⁵ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, 114.

Senate Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures. “Senator Theodore G. Bilbo conducted an aggressive and ruthless campaign for his reelection to the office of United States Senator,” their official complaint reads, “with the purpose, object, design and calculation to effectively deprive and deny the *duly qualified* Negro electors of Mississippi of their constitutional rights, privileges and immunities to register and vote and otherwise legally participate in the said primary election” (emphasis added).¹⁷⁶ The Senate special committee agreed to investigate the claims that the Bilbo campaign violated federal law and sent DOJ investigators Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon down to Mississippi to conduct hundreds of interviews with Black voters who experienced different forms of disfranchisement firsthand.

While the Senate’s investigation was not nearly as expansive as the FBI’s inquiry into the 1946 Democratic primary in Georgia, its findings detail the specific ways in which the Bilbo campaign disfranchised Black voters. First, investigators found that Bilbo’s rhetoric was a significant deterrent to Black voters. T.B. Wilson, the president of the Negro Mississippi Progressive Voters League, and Percy Green, editor of the *Jackson Advocate*, eloquently explained to the Senate committee the different ways in which Bilbo’s speeches stifled the Black vote. Citing Bilbo’s repeated appeals to white Mississippians to resist the Black voter registration drive, Wilson testified, Black voters believed that local white officials “would take that instruction not to register them.”¹⁷⁷ While Wilson stressed how Bilbo fueled Black voters’ distrust of the registration process, Percy Green captured the sheer terror that Bilbo’s speeches incited within Mississippi’s Black communities. “I heard the speeches and saw them in the press releases, and I felt some of the fear that I think was engendered by the speeches,” Green

¹⁷⁶ Petition for redress in election of Theodore G. Bilbo, box 984, folder 5, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁷⁷ Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

explained. In response to the investigator's clarification that "it is your view that the speeches made by Senator Bilbo caused a lot of colored people not to register and not to vote," Green replied, "I am as certain as I can be about that."¹⁷⁸

While Wilson and Percy's observations may seem straightforward in retrospect, verifying the link between political rhetoric and voter suppression on a national stage was unprecedented. The Senate hearings proved an effective platform for Black voters in Mississippi, whose testimony added nuance to the broader conversation surrounding voting rights. The same mainstream press that was silent when Johnston executed his suppression scheme in an extraordinary session just two years earlier published extensive coverage of Bilbo and the ongoing Senate investigation. When Bilbo—who was then notorious across the North for his racist outbursts—so much as suggested in a public statement that Black participation in the 1946 Democratic primary warranted the Mississippi legislature to repeal all laws related to party primaries from the books "to keep our Democratic primaries all white," the national news outlets characterized his remarks as reactionary and authoritarian.¹⁷⁹ Marquis Childs of *The Washington Post* recounted the Senate inquiry as a tale fit for Hollywood. By framing Idaho Senator Glen Taylor as a hero for reading several of Bilbo's most menacing quotations out loud on the Senate floor, Childs reported a romanticized account of the Senate's crusade to retaliate against "the violence implied in the demagogic raving that Bilbo did in Mississippi last June." The Senate hearings, Childs quipped, presented "a situation made for a movie producer."¹⁸⁰ As details behind Bilbo's 1946 primary campaign emerged before a national audience, Northern outrage turned voter suppression into a national issue.

¹⁷⁸ Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁷⁹ "Bilbo Pushes Vote Curb: Urges Mississippi to Change Election Laws So as to Bar Negroes," *The New York Times*, 6 July 1946, 16.

¹⁸⁰ Marquis Childs, "Washington Calling: Drama In the Senate," *The Washington Post*, 6 January 1947, 5.



Oust Bilbo flyer. | Series III: Social and Political Research, 1930-1986, M. H. Ross papers, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Special Collections and Archives.

The national scope of the Senate investigation was further heightened by the efforts of national civil rights organizations to unseat Bilbo. The Civil Rights Congress (CRC), a national civil rights organization that was founded in 1946 and quickly assumed a reputation of radicalism, started the “Oust Bilbo” campaign to help raise national public awareness of the Senate investigation that had the potential to unseat one of the South’s most infamous demagogues. The CRC effectively framed voter suppression in Mississippi as a national issue; the Black voters who came forward to testify against Bilbo “have given the Senate a legal basis for unseating Bilbo,” a campaign flyer explained, and “they now look to sincere Americans to join in wiping out this national menace to democracy.”¹⁸¹ Specifically, the CRC sought to sway the outcome of the Senate investigation by boosting awareness surrounding Bilbo’s voter suppression campaign, circulating petitions, and encouraging Americans to write the Senate

¹⁸¹ Oust Bilbo flyer, L2001-05_108_19 3, M. H. Ross papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

Campaign Expenditures Committee demanding a thorough investigation.¹⁸² Though the CRC's "Oust Bilbo" campaign would only have a nominal impact on an investigation overseen by a committee with a Democratic majority, national efforts aimed at unseating Bilbo not only promoted a greater national awareness of Bilbo and his racist rhetoric, but also began to define that rhetoric as mass disfranchisement.

While the Senate investigation and its coverage brought national attention to Bilbo's calls for racial terror and their implications, investigators also documented instances of racial violence, many of which did not receive even local press coverage during the election or its immediate aftermath.¹⁸³ They found that many Black voters who were assaulted on election day faced violence from both white vigilantes and uniformed police officers. Richard E. Daniel, for example, told investigators that two unidentified white men physically assaulted him when he arrived at his polling place. Daniel, a qualified voter, was then arrested, taken into custody, and knocked unconscious by the officer who brought him to jail. After being charged with drunk and disorderly conduct, Daniel was released on \$250 bond and was later fined \$10 for the fallacious charge. Others were taken into custody by police officers at polling places across the state for fake charges such as "disturbing the peace."¹⁸⁴ Often Black veterans— who were legally qualified to vote without paying the poll tax thanks to a recent Mississippi law— were uniquely targeted at the polls and at registrars' offices. In Rankin County, a mob of white men brutally beat Etoy Fletcher, a Black veteran who was honorably discharged just two months earlier, when

¹⁸² Oust Bilbo leaflet, L2001-05_108_19 2, M. H. Ross papers.

¹⁸³ The *Jackson Advocate* initially reported that Black voters faced less violence than anticipated on election day. However, a follow-up report noted that "beginning with the very next day following election day and almost daily since that time there have been increasing reports of intimidation and violence visited upon Negro citizens." "Mississippians Vote Despite Bilbo Threats: No Incidents Of Violence Reported," *Jackson Advocate*, 6 July 1946, 1, and "Wide-Spread, Apprehension Among Negro Citizens As Reports Of Election Incidents Grow," *Jackson Advocate*, 13 July 1946, 1.

¹⁸⁴ Preliminary Survey and Report of Investigators Henry Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon, 7, box 984, folder 5, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

he attempted to register to vote in the primary.¹⁸⁵ When Fletcher asked a county official at the registrar's office about obtaining his poll tax exemption, the man responded by informing him that "niggers not allowed to vote in Rankin County" and demanded that Fletcher leave the courthouse if he "didn't want any trouble." While Fletcher waited for a bus home, four white men forced him into a car and brutally flogged him in the woods four miles away.¹⁸⁶ The upsurge in racial violence incidents during the summer of 1946 proves that whites in Mississippi took Bilbo's calls for violence seriously.

Investigators also uncovered instances of legal disfranchisement against African Americans attempting to register and vote in the July 2 election. For example, local officials from counties across the state abused the legal challenge process to the disadvantage of Black Mississippians. Dozens of Black voters reported that poll workers kept white and Black ballots separate, placing Black ballots in envelopes. Others claimed that they were erroneously put under oath and questioned about their party affiliation prior to receiving a ballot.¹⁸⁷ Investigators were unable to obtain any record that officials acted in accordance with Mississippi law— which stipulated a set of processes intended to ensure that challenged votes get counted and filed in a separate return— when they challenged Black votes *en masse*.¹⁸⁸ Some legal challenges more explicitly violated state and federal election law; officials in a district that included the majority-Black town of Mound Bayou attempted to purge the votes of all 112 African Americans who were able to cast their ballots on election day on the basis that they were not "good

¹⁸⁵ "Negro Vet Brutally Beaten By Rankin County Mob For Attempting To Register," *Jackson Advocate*, 22 June 1946, 1.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Preliminary Survey and Report of Investigators Henry Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁸⁷ Preliminary Survey and Report of Investigators Henry Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Democrats.”¹⁸⁹ The prevalence of legal disfranchisement in the 1946 Democratic primary meant that even Black Mississippians who met the state’s stringent qualification requirements and were undeterred by Bilbo’s threats of violence *still* risked their votes not being counted if a poll worker decided to stuff their ballot in a separate envelope.

Circuit clerks also played a significant role in suppressing the Black vote through legal disfranchisement. Indeed, clerks acted as the gatekeepers between citizens and the ballot; they administered literacy tests, collected poll taxes, and operated the poll books.¹⁹⁰ Because circuit clerks ultimately had the final say on which names were added to the voter rolls, many defied the legal guidelines stipulated by state law when registering voters. Investigators concluded that in the 22 counties they surveyed, circuit courts were consistently “arriving at an ultimate common goal of confronting the negro with as many obstacles as possible... to prevent him from registering.”¹⁹¹ The precise ways in which clerks would disfranchise Black voters varied; clerks in Natchez claimed that the 71 Black veterans were required to pay the poll tax even though they were legally exempt for their military service, and those in other counties refused to register Black voters because they believed “it was a white Democratic primary.”¹⁹² Regardless of the rationale clerks invoked to illegally disfranchise Black voters, legal disfranchisement ran rampant in Mississippi during the 1946 primary season— even if it was at the time overshadowed by stories the press deemed more newsworthy, such as Bilbo revealing he was briefly a member of the Poplarville chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Preliminary Survey and Report of Investigators Henry Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ “Case Against Bilbo,” *The Washington Post*, 5 November 1946, 8.

Members of the Senate special committee attributed some of these coordinated legal suppression efforts to Bilbo's speeches, which often urged local officials to participate in unlawful voter disfranchisement. For example, Bilbo urged circuit court clerks to give difficult questions to Black voters during the literacy test, which required voters to answer questions pertaining to the Mississippi constitution. In one address, Bilbo instructed officials unable to produce a set of questions difficult enough to stump Black voters while administering the literacy test to "write Bilbo or any good lawyer and there are a hundred good questions which can be furnished."¹⁹⁴ In other words, Bilbo instructed circuit court clerks to disqualify Black voters by asking them impossible questions, and the testimony of several Black voters reveals that circuit court clerks across Mississippi listened. During the investigation, several clerks testified that they deliberately prevented African Americans from voting by making registration requirements more stringent, and one clerk from Louisville, Mississippi, directly indicated that Bilbo's speeches influenced his handling of voter registration.¹⁹⁵

During the Senate hearings, Bilbo made his racist views clear but maintained that his speech on the campaign trail was legal. "If I was going to go out here and tell the people to use the shotguns and use anything in the world to keep the nigger from voting, I would be subject to impeachment or dismissal," Bilbo admitted to the committee. "I didn't say that."¹⁹⁶ Yet news coverage of the campaign quoted Bilbo telling a crowd in Starkville, Mississippi, that "the best time to see the Negro about not voting is the night before the election," implying that the use of extralegal violence was not only justified, but also the most effective means of suppressing the Black vote.¹⁹⁷ On another occasion, Bilbo volunteered his legal services to white people who use

¹⁹⁴ "Collins, Bilbo Air Claims in Jackson," *Clarion-Ledger*, 28 May 1946, 1.

¹⁹⁵ Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ "No Incidents of Violence Reported," *Jackson Advocate*, 6 July 1946, 1.

violence to keep Black citizens from casting their ballots. “I’m a dam good lawyer [sic],” Bilbo bragged on the campaign trail. “I’ve defended people in 11 murder cases in my life and got them off free.”¹⁹⁸ Although Bilbo denied accusations that he advocated violence on the campaign trail when questioned by members of the Senate, his speeches included direct appeals for violence and met the necessary criteria for impeachment that Bilbo himself outlined in his testimony before the committee.

Bilbo also argued that his speech was lawful because Mississippi law barred African Americans from voting in the Democratic primary. However, no laws in the Mississippi state code officially established the Democratic Party as a whites-only organization. Further, the Senate questioned a member of the State Democratic Executive Committee, who testified that the Democratic Party did not pass any resolutions excluding Black Mississippians from party membership because they had “a perfect legal right to vote in the election” pursuant to the *Smith v. Allwright* ruling.¹⁹⁹ As one of Mississippi’s leading Democrats, Bilbo’s claim that he earnestly believed his speeches were consistent with the laws of Mississippi and the policy of the Democratic Party is unlikely.²⁰⁰ Bilbo’s inclination toward bending the rules also became evident when the hearings were held; on the day investigators were set to begin hearing the testimony of Black witnesses at the Federal Building in Jackson, Bilbo took office space down the hall from the room assigned to the investigators so that Black witnesses would have to pass him on their way to testify against his campaign.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Minority Report, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Preliminary Survey and Report of Investigators Henry Patrick Kiley, Francis T. Kelly, and Roy A. Moon, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

Despite the investigative findings that suggested otherwise, the Senate special committee ultimately voted along partisan lines that Bilbo conducted his campaign lawfully. The majority, which consisted of the committee's three Democrats, argued that while there may have been "a few unjustifiable acts of violence and, perhaps, rather strained efforts of registrars and other election officials to prevent Negroes from registering and from voting," the investigation did not adequately demonstrate proof that Bilbo's speeches actually contributed to acts of violence or disfranchisement.²⁰² While the two Republicans on the committee published a minority opinion that cited dozens of depositions in which Black leaders, veterans, and voters definitively stated that themselves or members of the Black community stayed home from the polls precisely because they were fearful of the violence Bilbo's speeches might incite, one of the Senators authoring the majority opinion declared that there was no connection between the Bilbo campaign and mass disfranchisement after reading just "two of [Bilbo's] speeches."²⁰³ Bilbo's fate was ultimately protected by the slim Democratic majority on the Senate special committee, and months of being the target of Northern outrage and national campaigns to unseat him turned Bilbo into a martyr among white supremacists in the South.

The parallels between Talmadge and Bilbo extended beyond the demise of their careers, as both men similarly evaded responsibility for suppressing the Black vote through death. Before he could officially be sworn in as Senator in January 1947, Theodore Bilbo announced that he was suffering from oral cancer.²⁰⁴ After a series of operations and the publication of his political tract, Bilbo died on August 21, 1947, still barred from his seat in the U.S. Senate due to unresolved allegations of campaign fraud. Unlike Eugene Talmadge, however, Bilbo's record on

²⁰² "Senator Theo G. Bilbo, 69, Dies," *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, 21 August 1947, 14, and Majority report, 5.

²⁰³ Investigation of Senator Theodore Bilbo, Majority Report, box 984, folder 6, Theodore G. Bilbo papers.

²⁰⁴ "Bitter Fight Is Halted by Bi-Partisan Agreement," *The Washington Post*, 5 January 1947, 1.

voter suppression was examined before the American people in a highly publicized Senate investigation. While most obituaries first recognized Bilbo's racial diatribes and ties to the Ku Klux Klan, they also detailed the 1946 allegations of voter disfranchisement.²⁰⁵ Though Bilbo was elected for his rousing speeches in campaigns spanning nearly four decades, reports indicate that his voice was hardly audible as he sat for hearings during his final months in the Senate.²⁰⁶

Theodore Bilbo's 1946 campaign for reelection and subsequent Senate investigation was a crucial turning point in the history of voter suppression at both the state and federal level. Less than two months after Bilbo's death, President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights brought the national Democratic Party one step closer to adopting civil rights by publishing its landmark report, *To Secure These Rights*. The report—which moves beyond an analysis of violence and assesses the significance and prevalence of legal disfranchisement in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*—became one of the formative documents of the modern civil rights movement.²⁰⁷ About a year after the publication of *To Secure These Rights*, the Democratic Party officially unveiled its civil rights platform, which endorsed a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, anti-lynch legislation, desegregation of the armed forces, and the abolition of the poll tax.²⁰⁸ When Truman and the Democratic Party announced the platform at the contentious 1948 national convention in Philadelphia, however, they were met with vicious opposition by the white supremacist faction of the party, which broke from the Democrats to form their own party. Also known as the Dixiecrats, the States' Rights Democratic Party was spearheaded by Southern Democratic leaders including Fielding Wright, the sitting

²⁰⁵ Robert Bruskin, "Senator Bilbo Dead at 69; White Supremacy Advocate," *The Washington Post*, 22 August 1947, 1.

²⁰⁶ "Doctor Reveals Bilbo Suffers Mouth Cancer," *Albuquerque Journal*, 5 January 1947, 3.

²⁰⁷ *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1947).

²⁰⁸ "There Is But One Choice... What the Parties Did On Civil Rights," *Chicago Defender*, 24 July 1948, 2.

Governor of Mississippi and vice-presidential nominee of the States' Rights Democratic Party in 1948.²⁰⁹

While Mississippi's response to *Smith v. Allwright* was delayed relative to that of South Carolina and Georgia, its elected officials had both the power and tools necessary to resist state and national efforts aimed at expanding voting rights, as evidenced by the 1946 primary season and the state's prominent role in the Dixiecrat revolt. In some ways, Bilbo's reelection campaign, which relied primarily upon extralegal threats of violence rather than legal tactics to preserve the white primary, represents a departure from the disfranchisement campaigns wielded in South Carolina and Georgia. This chapter, however, illustrates the ways in which Bilbo blurred the lines between legal and extralegal disfranchisement. In exercising what he considered his right to free speech on the campaign trail, Bilbo violated federal law by creating a culture of intimidation terrifying enough to prevent the majority of Mississippi's Black population from registering to vote, even if he was never held accountable by the Senate special committee. Though he did so less directly than Johnston or Talmadge, Bilbo also facilitated more traditional forms of legal disfranchisement by instructing local officials to illegally strike the names of the few Black voters who were able to register from the rolls. As white anxieties surrounding Black political equality and desegregation continued into the next decade, the fate of voting rights remained crucial to the civil rights struggle. Even after the Democratic Party officially integrated, voter suppression remained—and still is—the chief tactic for resisting social and political equality.

²⁰⁹ For more on the 1948 Democratic National Convention, see Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, 130-49.

CONCLUSION

About two months after Georgians voted to send Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock to the United States Senate in the highly anticipated January 2021 runoff elections, Georgia Republicans passed one of the most restrictive voting laws the nation has seen in decades. The 98-page Senate Bill 202— which passed by a party-line vote on March 25, 2021— limited ballot drop boxes, subjected local election boards to heightened state oversight, and imposed new qualifications for voting by provisional ballot. The bill also made it illegal to offer food or water to voters waiting in long lines at the polls, a direct attack on voting rights nonprofits that recently began implementing this practice at predominantly Black polling sites with hours-long wait times. These new restrictions in Georgia were signed into law as part of a larger national trend among Republican-controlled battleground states to put up voting barriers in the aftermath of the 2020 election.²¹⁰

While Republican leaders in Georgia claimed the law had nothing to do with race, voting rights advocates anticipated the negative impact of these new measures on Black voters and other marginalized groups. Governor Brian Kemp, who was accused of purging upwards of 40,000 Black votes as Georgia’s secretary of state in 2018, maintained that the new restrictions were necessary to “keep our elections secure, accessible and fair.”²¹¹ Yet Democrats argued that SB 202 was nothing more than conservative retaliation against racial minorities for participating in the 2020 election. Georgia’s new election law, voting rights activist and chief executive officer

²¹⁰ Nick Corasaniti, “Georgia G.O.P. Passes Major Law to Limit Voting Amid Nationwide Push,” *The New York Times*, 3 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/us/politics/georgia-voting-law-republicans.html>

²¹¹ Ibid, Ella Lee, “Fact check: Post online about Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp’s 2018 win is partly false,” *USA Today*, 18 November 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/18/fact-check-partly-false-claim-gov-brian-kemp-and-2018-election/6327447002/>

of the New Georgia Project Nsé Ufot explained, was a “direct attack to disenfranchise Black voters... a whitelash against the progressive coalition that came out in historic numbers to vote out [Donald Trump] and send two Democratic senators to D.C.”²¹²

Today, proponents of voting rights restrictions are quick to invoke race-neutral terms such as “security” and “integrity” to justify laws that disproportionately prevent or disqualify people of color from registering and voting in elections. Yet these seemingly moderate legal tactics have a long and violent history. Although the American collective memory generally condemns figures such as Talmadge and Bilbo for their overt racism and the violence they incited, we often forget that even the most diehard white supremacists turned to legal disfranchisement in moments when violence and intimidation alone would not be enough to keep them in power. Other less notorious Southern Democrats like Olin Johnston, who coordinated a widescale legal suppression campaign yet refrained from rousing white violence or spewing racist rhetoric at every campaign stop, more closely resemble modern advocates of voter suppression.

The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* was a major regional turning point in the history of voter suppression. The decision came at a moment when the burgeoning civil rights movement, federal integration efforts, and the return of Black veterans to the Jim Crow South threatened to undermine white supremacy. By abolishing the single most effective tactic Southern Democrats had at their disposal to suppress the Black vote, the *Smith* ruling pushed Southern Democrats to take a more clandestine approach to voter suppression in the postwar years.

²¹² Igor Derysh, “Georgia GOP called ‘shameless’ for trying to use new voting law to oust local election officials,” *Salon*, 4 September 2021. <https://www.salon.com/2021/09/04/georgia-gop-called-shameless-for-trying-to-use-new-voting-law-to-oust-local-election-officials/>

This new brand of legal disfranchisement took on different forms that varied from state to state. In South Carolina, Democrats under sitting Governor Olin Johnston's leadership suppressed votes by coordinating a legislative campaign to strike all laws related to party primaries from the state code, effectively privatizing the Democratic Party. While Johnston's deregulation scheme ultimately succumbed to legal challenges in 1948, his swift action to sidestep the Supreme Court's orders in the immediate aftermath of the decision inspired Democrats in other states to take similar steps to preserve the spirit of the white primary.²¹³ In Georgia, the sitting governor opposed actions aimed at circumventing the federal judiciary. The white populist faction of the Democratic Party subsequently threw their support behind Eugene Talmadge, whose promises to reinstate the white primary became the foundation of his 1946 gubernatorial campaign. Worried that the reactionary faction of the Democratic Party would get outnumbered by good-government liberals and newly enfranchised African Americans, Talmadge coordinated the illegal purging of thousands of Black voters through the use of challenge forms. In Mississippi, Theodore Bilbo's speeches advocated violence as the most effective form of disfranchisement and explicitly instructed local officials to illegally strike the names of qualified Black voters from the rolls. While post-*Smith* suppression looked different in each state, the relationship between violence and legal disfranchisement was consistently intertwined. In each of the three discussed in this thesis, Black determination to vote in the face of legal suppression provoked waves of racial terror.

²¹³ After the Texas Democratic Party extended membership to Black and Hispanic citizens, Democrats in one county continued to maintain a whites-only association to select candidates for official nomination prior to the county's Democratic primary. Because the candidates selected by the whites-only association usually won the Democratic primary, this practice was eventually outlawed by the United States Supreme Court in *Terry v. Adams*, 345 U.S. 461 (1953).

Unearthing the ways in which whites resisted the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* offers necessary context behind modern disfranchisement that continues to persist today. Unlike the more overtly violent forms of earlier nineteenth-century voter suppression, disfranchisement in the postwar era was covert— especially in Georgia. The process of reconstructing a history that whites in power were committed to hiding comes with its own set of challenges, but it also reflects the difficulties associated with holding current elected officials legally accountable for voter suppression. That state officials are seldom found liable for disfranchising marginalized voters awards modern legal suppression a veneer of legitimacy, yet white supremacy represents the very foundation of their power. Some figures who led suppression efforts in the past, like Talmadge and Bilbo, earned their place in the American collective memory as racist demagogues; but others, like Johnston, left a more moderate legacy undefined by the number of votes they stripped from their Black constituents. Members of the political elite continue to play an active role in fomenting racial divisiveness in order to maintain power. Electing leaders who are committed to overcoming white supremacy, while an onerous and often impossible task at a time when voter suppression remains rampant, is key to achieving a fair and democratic election process in all regions of the country.

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