

1891: Jim Crow – the Election Reform Act

<p>Historical images.</p> <p>Cut to the legislative chamber looking exactly as it did in the previous segment. J. F. Henley rises and begins to speak.</p> <p>Henley's tone is one of barely restrained anger.</p> <p>As he finishes and sits, he draws an angry response from the other legislators.</p>	<p>Narrator Voice Over: Most historians believe that the Union Labor Party actually won the 1888 election, only to get counted out by crooked election judges. The Democratic Party was stunned that a coalition of dissatisfied white and black voters could combine to amass an electoral majority. They were also embarrassed by the widespread and obvious abuses during the election. They attempted to kill two birds with one stone with the 1891 Election Reform Bill. Though it was generally hailed as a reform measure, it contained many provisions, such as the outlawing of pre-marked ballots, that would make it more difficult for blacks and poor whites, many of whom were illiterate, to vote.</p> <p>The black legislators tended to ignore the measure as they concentrated their attention on the Separate Coach Bill. Instead the fight against it was led by J. F. Henley, a very young republican from Searcy County.</p> <p>Henley: There can be no doubt that this measure we now have before us is one of the most damnable and infamous ever introduced in a legislature. This bill has the impress of Hell upon it. It provides that the governor shall appoint "discreet persons" to conduct the elections. And who do you suppose these "discreet persons" shall be? Why the same courthouse gang that has committed election fraud for years. This bill licenses murders and thieves to steal the ballot boxes. It doesn't take much poker sense to realize that the Democrats are trying to turn a jack from the bottom of the deck.</p>
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Cut to S. A. Miller, who rises to be recognized. The Speaker's voice is heard off camera.

Miller is an older, distinguished gentleman whose tone is earnest and sincere.

Cheers greet the conclusion of Miller's remarks.

Historical images.

Speaker: The Chair recognizes the Honorable S. A. Miller.

Miller: Gentlemen, the arguments of the opposition against this measure ultimately come down to a question of honor. I assure you that there is enough honesty and intelligence in the Democratic Party, and in the party of the people to come after her, to give us free and fair elections. If the better element of the Democratic Party will assert itself, we will have no more trouble in Arkansas over elections, and to that extent the bill is in the nature of an experiment. For myself, I am not afraid of the results. If the State shall fall into the hands of enemies of the people and dishonest of the Democratic Party were put at the head of affairs, of course the law would be a failure and the people would suffer. So would they abuse any law. I do not support this bill as a party measure...but as a reform measure, and in the hands of its friends, or any honest party, we can reasonably expect favorable results.

Narrator: Black political leaders were accustomed to holding rallies or barbeques on election day, distributing pre-marked "tickets," then marching en masse to the polls. The Election Reform Law of 1891 made both pre-marked ballots and campaigning on election day illegal. While these measures were clearly aimed at diminishing the vote of blacks and poor whites, not even the bill's sponsors seem to have anticipated the dramatic impact it would have on the upcoming election. In 1892 blacks were swept from political office in Arkansas and would not return until the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.