The Ballot Barrier

Trace the path from postwar restrictions to federal voting protections.

SS24.USG.7b "Describe how Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and the Selma-to-Montgomery March influenced the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail about exclusion in each of the first two paragraphs. In the third paragraph, circle one detail showing public pressure and one showing a federal response.

Why Voting Rights Needed Enforcement

1. In 1865, after the Civil War, Southern legislatures adopted Black Codes that restricted the freedom of formerly enslaved people. Some laws limited where Black workers could work or required labor contracts; penalties for violating them could force people back into exploitative labor. Black men were also shut out of elections in the former Confederate states. These measures showed that emancipation alone did not guarantee political power. Congress responded during Reconstruction with federal protections, including the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, which barred denying the vote because of race. Yet a constitutional promise would mean little if states found new ways to block voters.

2. After Reconstruction, Southern officials built a system of racial segregation known as Jim Crow. To keep Black citizens from voting despite the Fifteenth Amendment, states imposed literacy tests and poll taxes, while local officials applied rules unfairly. Threats and violence made registration even more dangerous. A poll tax demanded money before a person could vote; a literacy test could let an official reject a qualified applicant. These barriers were not isolated mistakes by individual clerks. They were part of a durable system of state and local power that made voting rights difficult to exercise without federal enforcement.

3. In March 1965, voting rights organizers marched from Selma toward Montgomery, Alabama, to demand access to the ballot. On March 7, state troopers attacked marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge; television coverage brought that violence into homes across the country. President Lyndon Johnson called for voting rights legislation on March 15, and a larger, federally protected march reached Montgomery on March 25. The attacks exposed the force used to defend Jim Crow voting barriers and increased pressure for national action. Signed in August, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 targeted literacy tests and allowed federal oversight of registration in places with histories of discrimination.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Black Codes help reveal the need for stronger voting protections during Reconstruction?

2. Why did Jim Crow voting practices make the Fifteenth Amendment's promise difficult to exercise?

3. How did events during the Selma-to-Montgomery March increase pressure for the Voting Rights Act?

4. How did the Voting Rights Act respond to a problem the Fifteenth Amendment had not solved?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 95 word museum label titled “From Restriction to Protection.” Connect the Black Codes, Jim Crow voting barriers, and the Selma-to-Montgomery March in a cause-and-effect account; explain why a federal response was needed and name one provision of the 1965 act.

ANSWER KEY

The Ballot Barrier

GRADE 12 · SS24.USG.7b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one detail about exclusion in each of the first two paragraphs. In the third paragraph, circle one detail showing public pressure and one showing a federal response. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Black Codes help reveal the need for stronger voting protections during Reconstruction?	**The codes restricted freedom, and Black men remained excluded from elections. Emancipation had not secured political power, so Congress adopted federal protections, including the Fifteenth Amendment.**
2	Why did Jim Crow voting practices make the Fifteenth Amendment's promise difficult to exercise?	**Literacy tests, poll taxes, unfair enforcement, and intimidation kept Black citizens from registering or voting despite the amendment's ban on race-based denial.**
3	How did events during the Selma-to-Montgomery March increase pressure for the Voting Rights Act?	**Television coverage of troopers attacking marchers exposed the violence behind voting barriers to a national audience and increased pressure for federal legislation.**
4	How did the Voting Rights Act respond to a problem the Fifteenth Amendment had not solved?	**The amendment prohibited race-based denial of the vote, but discriminatory barriers persisted. The act targeted literacy tests and allowed federal oversight of registration in places with histories of discrimination.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

From Restriction to Protection

After the Civil War, Black Codes restricted formerly enslaved people's freedom, while Black men remained excluded from elections in former Confederate states. The Fifteenth Amendment promised protection against race-based voting restrictions, but Jim Crow officials used literacy tests and intimidation to keep Black citizens from registering. When troopers attacked marchers near Selma in 1965, television viewers saw the violence behind those barriers. That exposure helped build pressure for a federal law. The Voting Rights Act allowed federal oversight of registration where discrimination had persisted.

Accept labels that accurately link all three developments and explain why federal enforcement was needed. A valid provision may be the act's restrictions on literacy tests or its authorization of federal oversight of registration in covered places.