

Review:

***Why the Vote Wasn't Enough for Selma*, by Karlyn Forner, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, xx+350pp., \$27.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0822370055**

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Lyndon Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act (VRA) to a joint session of Congress eight days after the Bloody Sunday attacks at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. When he signed the bill into law on 6 August 1965, Johnson called the legislation 'a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battlefield'. At his last press conference as president, Johnson stated that he regarded the VRA as his greatest achievement.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is widely regarded as the most effective piece of civil rights legislation in American history. As black voter registration and office-holding skyrocketed in the years after its passage, it was said to have produced little less than a 'quiet revolution' in voting rights for racial minorities (McDonald 1989, Davidson & Grofman 1994). Its measures, such as the dispatching of federal agents to promote registration and strict federal preclearance rules, demonstrated serious federal commitment to the enforcement of voting rights for African Americans. Some comparative political scientists argue that it is impossible to characterise the United States as a full democracy before the Voting Rights Act's passage (Therborn 1977, Mickey 2015, Gibson & King 2016).

In this decade of semi-centennial anniversaries of the American civil rights movement, a number of high-quality histories of the VRA have been published (e.g., Berman 2015, May 2015). These texts have added poignancy and relevance because their publication has come in the shadow of the 2013 *Shelby County v Holder* decision, the most devastating blow levelled against the VRA in its history (King & Smith 2016).

Karlyn Forner's *Why the Vote Wasn't Enough for Selma* (2017) returns to the blood-soaked soil from which the VRA sprang: Selma, the capital seat of Dallas County in Alabama's Black Belt region. Many histories of voting rights begin with the 1965 confrontation on Edmund Pettus Bridge (e.g., Remnick 2010). Forner opens her history six decades earlier, when Edmund Pettus was not a bridge but Alabama's United States senator. Forner pinpoints the ratification of Alabama's segregationist constitution in 1901 as the moment when white Alabamans finally brought the state's brief experiment in multi-racial democracy to a decisive end. The decades to follow were marked by intense efforts on behalf of whites to restore a racial order which deprived African Americans of equal citizenship and a civilised life.

While Forner's book is a local history of Selma, its reach is much wider than a simple retelling of the actions of a cast of local characters. Events in Selma shaped the trajectory of the national civil rights struggle, but Forner does an excellent job at showing how national policy shaped life in Selma.

Showing the local effects of national policy can deepen understandings of their racial implications. Scholars have shown that many New Deal programmes deliberately excluded African Americans (Katznelson 2005, Ward 2005), but few have shown the unintended consequences of well-meaning federal policies. A recurring theme of Forner's book is the desire by reformers to end the stranglehold of 'King Cotton' in the Black Belt. Franklin Roosevelt's left-wing Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace attempted to diversify the southern economy by paying farmers to destroy their cotton fields in exchange for federal subsidies. While the administration's policy expressly required landowners to distribute the

money to their former employees, non-compliance was rife with landowners pocketing the funds. As a result, the Roosevelt administration's anti-cotton policies enriched white farmers while leaving African American sharecroppers in an even worse financial situation, with many not only losing their income but also their homes on the farms.

Forner shows that blacks were not acquiescent to white oppression. She chronicles how dozens of the Dallas County blacks raised money to pay the poll tax, a significant financial burden, only to find themselves purged from the voter rolls through other methods. Local black empowerment groups such as Dallas County Voters League were organising resistance to white supremacy long before (and after) the arrival of the SCLC or SNCC.

While Selma is remembered in the national consciousness for its role in the voting rights struggle Forner's book is an important reminder that the civil rights movement was equally a labour struggle. African Americans repeatedly sought redress from their economic plight, and Forner details the role of socialists in organising black sharecroppers unions. In all instances, these efforts were met with violence. Black trade unionists were murdered with the implicit sanction of local police.

This study brings greater nuance to the grand narratives of the civil rights struggle. Forner reveals actors concealed from more general histories. She, for example, highlights Selma's Jewish community, which was economically prosperous but faced threats of anti-Semitic violence from organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Forner's book identifies strategies used by white Americans to avoid the imperatives of an integrated, racially equal society. She writes that 'nearly every white child' attends one of the town's two private schools, established in the midst of 1960s desegregation efforts. One father went as far to say he'd rather send his children all to Vietnam than have them attend an integrated school. John T Morgan Academy, founded the same year as the Voting Rights Act and named after a Confederate general, admitted its first black student only in 2008. The schools in Selma are more segregated than they were four decades ago, a trend of re-segregation which has been repeated across the United States (Johnson & King 2018).

In the two decades in which Selma has had a majority-black council and black mayors, its economic and racial inequalities appear to have improved little. Nearly 1 in 2 children in Dallas County lives in poverty. Nearly 9 in 10 residents lack a university degree. As Forner writes, Selma's black leaders 'took charge of a city plagued by economic problems much bigger than itself'. The vote was always necessary but never sufficient to black equality. Procedural democracy without the resources to invest in communities or to redistribute wealth to the historically marginalised is but a 'hollow prize' (Friesema 1969).

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