

Sources: The Hope and Fragility of Democracy in the United States

Activity 1. What Are the Conflicting Strands in US History?

SOURCE 1: Excerpt from an interview with Professor Eric Foner, [Learning from the Failure of Reconstruction](#), the *New Yorker*

[T]he thousands who stormed the Capitol do not believe in political democracy when they lose. They believe in it when they win, but that's not democracy.

He goes on to say:

I think January 6th was an interesting day from a historical point of view, because it began, if you remember, with people talking about the victory of these two candidates in Georgia, a Black man and a Jewish man, and realizing that's an amazing thing for Georgia. Georgia has a very long history of racism and anti-Semitism. That's how it began. Four or six hours later, you have an armed mob seizing the Capitol building. You have these two themes of American history in **juxtaposition [contrast]** to each other. That's my point. And both of them are part of the American tradition, and we have to be aware of both of them, not just the more honorable parts.¹

¹ Isaac Chotiner, "[Learning from the Failure of Reconstruction](#)," the *New Yorker*, January 13, 2021. Emphasis added.

Activity 2. How Do the Democratic and Anti-Democratic Strands Appear During the Reconstruction Era?

SOURCE 2: Image of the First South Carolina Legislature After the 1867 Reconstruction Acts²

In 1868, South Carolina had the first state legislature with a black majority. This image includes 63 of the legislature's members, and it was distributed throughout South Carolina by opponents of Radical Reconstruction.

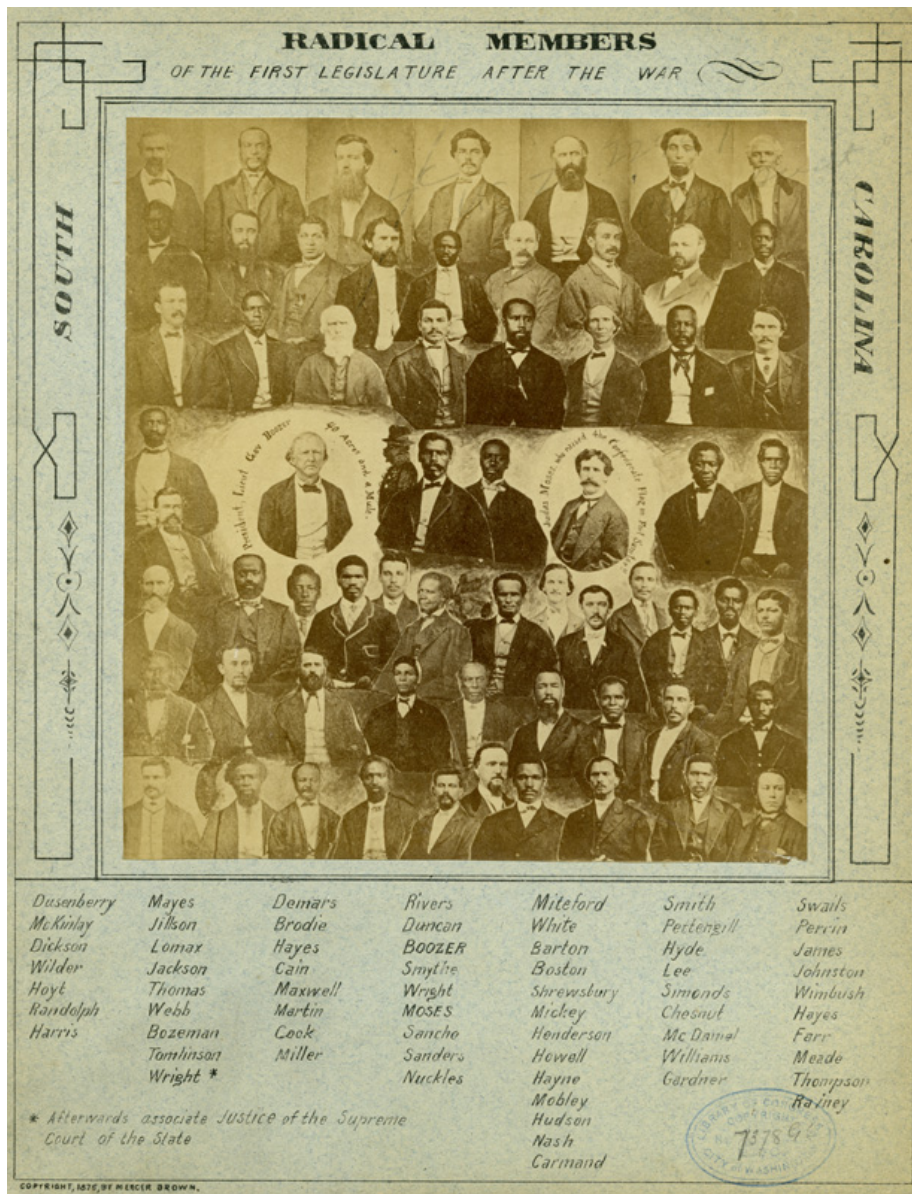


Image Credit: Library of Congress

² This image can also be found in our resource [The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy](#) (p. 134) and on our [website](#).

SOURCE 3: Excerpt from Frederick Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants"

During the Reconstruction era, Frederick Douglass demanded government action to secure land, voting rights, and civil equality for black Americans. The following passage is excerpted from a speech given by Douglass to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in April 1865.

We may be asked, I say, why we want it [the right to vote]. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any **deprivation [taking away]** of their rights . . .

What I ask for the Negro is not **benevolence [kindness]**, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice. [Applause.] The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us. . . Everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, "What shall we do with the Negro?" I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us!. . . All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! If you see him on his way to school, let him alone, don't disturb him! If you see him going to the dinner-table at a hotel, let him go! If you see him going to the ballot-box, let him alone, don't disturb him!. . .³

³ Frederick Douglass, "[What the Black Man Wants](#)" (speech before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, April 1865). Emphasis added. This excerpt can also be found in our resource [The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy](#) (p. 43) and on our [website](#).

SOURCE 4: South Carolina “Red Shirts” Battle Plan (1876)

Democratic Party paramilitary groups opposed “Radical” Republicans who sought more equal rights for formerly enslaved people. These paramilitary groups emerged in South Carolina during the 1876 state and national campaigns, calling themselves the “Red Shirts.” Their official battle plan, which called for Democratic clubs armed with rifles and pistols, stated in part:

Every Democrat must feel honor bound to control the vote of at least one Negro, by intimidation, purchase, keeping him away. We must attend every Radical meeting. Democrats must go in as large numbers as they can, and well armed, behave at first with great courtesy and as soon as their speakers begin tell them that they are liars and are only trying to mislead the ignorant Negroes. In speeches to Negroes you must remember that they can only be influenced by their fears, superstitions and **cupidity [greed]**. Treat them so as to show them you are the superior race and that their natural position is that of subordination to the white man. Never threaten a man individually. If he deserves to be threatened, the necessities of the times require that he should die. A dead Radical is very harmless—a threatened Radical is often troublesome, sometimes dangerous, and always **vindictive [wanting revenge]**. Every club must be uniformed in a red shirt and they must be sure and wear it upon all public meetings and particularly on the day of election.⁴

⁴ 1 In Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (Da Capo Press, 1994), 465. Emphasis added. This excerpt can also be found in our resource [The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy](#) (p. 43).

Activity 3. How Do the Democratic and Anti-Democratic Strands Appear Today?

SOURCE 5: Excerpt from an interview with Professor Eric Foner, [Learning from the Failure of Reconstruction](#), the *New Yorker*

Georgia, like much of the Deep South, had a long history, first of all, of slavery. It was one of the major cotton-producing slave states. In Reconstruction, it had a very active Klan, which was very brutal and violent toward African-Americans and toward whites who coöperated with them. Later, it disenfranchised Black voters for a long time. . . You also have the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent in Georgia in the early twentieth century. So anti-Semitism was also pretty well **entrenched [established]**.

I'm giving you a **litany [list]** of bad things, but what's actually important is that people are able to overcome this. That with that history hanging over you, you still can elect a Black man and a Jew to the Senate from Georgia. So I think that's cause for optimism. We teach history, but history is not **determinism [fate]**. We don't have to just relive our history over and over again. It's possible to move beyond it, and I think what happened in Georgia is a little step in that direction.⁵

⁵ Isaac Chotiner, "[Learning from the Failure of Reconstruction](#)," the *New Yorker*, January 13, 2021. Emphasis added.

SOURCE 6: [‘They always put other barriers in place’: how Georgia activists fought off voter suppression](#), *The Guardian*

Deborah Scott has been registering voters for well over a decade in Georgia, but about five years ago she began to notice a problem. Georgia Stand-Up, the civic action group she leads, started getting a spike in calls from people who said they filled out a voter registration form but never received an official voter registration card. “We’re like ‘hey, what’s going on here?’,” she said.

Scott’s group adjusted their voter registration strategy. After they got someone to register, they started tracking their voter registration and following up with them to ensure it went through. When there was a problem, they would help the voter follow up with local election officials. Sometimes, after that follow-up inquiry, the election officials would “miraculously” discover the registration was there all along, Scott said.

Georgia Stand-Up took their strategy into the general election last year and Senate runoff this year, both of which saw extremely high turnout among Black voters. It’s a surge that many have attributed to years of investment by activists like Scott and Democrat Stacey Abrams, to mobilize voters of color. . .

As voter suppression has become more **brazen [bold]** in Georgia, overcoming it has become a core part of the work that Abrams and other organizers have done to mobilize the new electorate in the state. This work is not glamorous, focused on helping new voters navigate a bureaucracy designed to make it more difficult to vote. It’s making calls to voters to ensure they know their polling place, explaining how to fill out a mail-in ballot, and making sure they aren’t wrongly **purged [removed]** from the voter rolls. But the multi-year investment in overcoming voting barriers significantly contributed to organizers’ success in Georgia this year.⁶

⁶ Sam Levin, “[‘They always put other barriers in place’: how Georgia activists fought off voter suppression](#),” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2021. Emphasis added.