

The Election of 1876

By the mid-1870s, many Northerners were growing tired of Reconstruction. Federal troops were still posted in the South, although Southern whites had regained power in the majority of Southern state governments. To many, Reconstruction felt like a drain on resources and a waste of time. People were also becoming dissatisfied with the Republican Party. They had controlled the White House since Abraham Lincoln. However, an economic depression following the Panic of 1873 and accusations of corruption led voters to question the Republican Party. It seemed like time for a change.

For the 1876 presidential election, the Democrats nominated Samuel Tilden of New York. Republicans nominated Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio. It was a hotly contested campaign. On Election Day, Tilden appeared on the brink of victory with 184 out of the 185 electoral votes he needed to secure the presidency. Tilden had clearly won the popular vote. Hayes went to bed thinking he had lost. However, Republican supporters refused to accept defeat. They accused Democrats of suppressing, or denying, the African American vote (which at that time would have been for Republicans) in the three Southern states that remained under Republican control. The states were Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

Voter fraud was very common at this time and likely happened on both sides. Yet, race-based intimidation and violence at the polls *did* stop an untold number of potential voters in states across the South. It seemed impossible that Tilden could have won these remaining Republican-controlled states. Republicans threw out the disputed votes and claimed that Hayes was the Electoral College winner. Democrats protested.



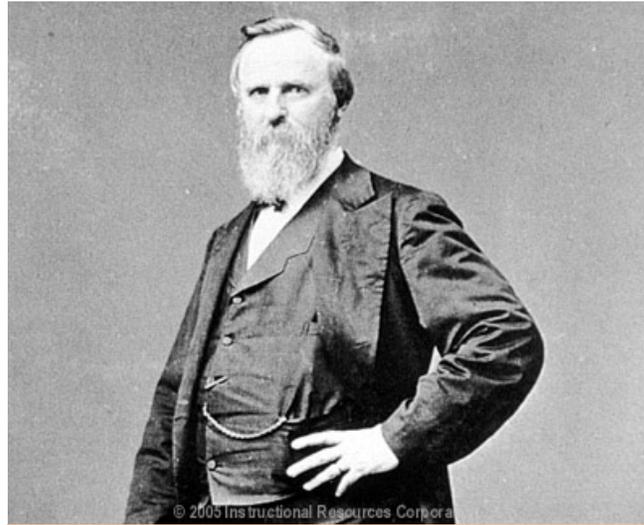
Painting of the 1877 Electoral Commission

The Compromise

For months the controversy raged on. Both sides argued that their candidate had won. The country faced a constitutional crisis. Just weeks prior to the inauguration, both sides struggled to reach a decision. Normally, the vice president, who is also the president of the Senate, would have settled the dispute.

However, he had died in 1875 and not been replaced. There were no directions in the Constitution to help deal with this situation.

Congress quickly passed a law appointing a new Electoral Commission made up of 15 members of both parties from the Senate, House, and Supreme Court. However, one of the independent Supreme Court justices refused to serve. A Republican justice took his place. The group met behind closed doors to hammer out an agreement. They ended up voting along party lines (eight Republicans to seven Democrats) to elect Hayes as president.



Portrait of President Rutherford B. Hayes

Democrats went along with the vote, so long as Republicans agreed to end Reconstruction. They also wanted a Democrat in a high-ranking cabinet post. This deal would come to be called the Compromise of 1877. Interestingly, there is no actual historical documentation of the compromise. The term was not coined until 1951 in noted historian C. Vann Woodward's book, *Reunion and Reaction*. Today, we refer to it as the defining moment when Reconstruction ended.

Jim Crow Begins

When Rutherford B. Hayes became president in March 1877, he followed through with his promise. All remaining federal troops were withdrawn from the South. Hayes still hoped to preserve equal rights for African Americans and build a strong Republican presence in the South. However, that did not happen. Because of how he "won" the office, many people never really accepted him as president. With the loss of federal enforcement and a Congress that did not want to get involved, the equal rights that African Americans had achieved during Reconstruction were quickly snatched away.

In the South, "Redeemer" Democrats took over state and local governments and forced out elected African American officials. State legislatures passed laws that discriminated against African Americans. Voter intimidation, poll taxes, fraud, and violence were widespread. The Ku Klux Klan terrorized any African American who dared to stand up for civil rights.

Historians refer to the period from the end of Reconstruction to the dawn of the civil rights movement as the Jim Crow era. The period from about 1877 to 1954 is known for discriminatory laws that separated African Americans and whites in virtually all areas of life.

Lasting Legacy

The Compromise of 1877 is significant for two important reasons. First, it marked the end of Reconstruction. Second, it signaled the beginning of the federal government “turning a blind eye” to racial discrimination. In 1883, the federal government not only turned away from civil rights issues but began *enforcing* discrimination. The United States Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which prohibited racial discrimination in hotels, trains, and other public spaces. The Court determined that preventing discrimination was unconstitutional and was not authorized by the Thirteenth or Fourteenth Amendments.

By 1890, legal segregation was fully in place in the former Confederate states and rapidly spread to other states as well. African Americans continued to face and fight against oppression, violence, and discrimination. It would take almost 100 years to see much progress toward equal rights.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What caused many Americans to question the Republican Party in the election of 1876?
 - A.** its desire to end Redemption
 - B.** its support of women's voting rights
 - C.** the failure to secure African American rights
 - D.** economic depression and charges of corruption

- 2.** What three Southern states remained under Republican control in 1876?
 - A.** Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana
 - B.** Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia
 - C.** Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina
 - D.** Mississippi, Florida, and North Carolina

- 3.** What did Democrats want in exchange for agreeing that Republican Rutherford B. Hayes had won the election?
 - A.** to make Tilden vice president
 - B.** more federal troops in the South
 - C.** a new commission to oversee future elections
 - D.** an end to Reconstruction and a cabinet position

- 4.** Imagine that Reconstruction had continued for another 20 years. How might life have been different for African Americans at that time? How might the United States be different today? In your answer, include details from the reading passage.