

Station #1: Political Change during Reconstruction

With the ratification of the 15th Amendment, African-American men gained the right to vote. During the period of Radical Reconstruction beginning around 1867 and lasting into the mid-1870s, African-Americans exercised their political rights widely. Voting in large numbers, they combined with northern migrants (known as “carpetbaggers”) and white southern Republicans (known as “scalawags”) to form large Republican majorities in many southern states. This process was augmented by the disfranchisement of former confederates. In states with large African-American populations, such as South Carolina, many African-Americans were elected to state and even federal offices. White southern Democrats perpetuated the view that Radical Reconstruction placed the worst elements of southern society in power. They argued that these new government leaders were inexperienced, inept, and corrupt. Current research by historians such as Thomas Holt indicates that, overall, these Republican governments were capable despite their inexperience, and that they were no more corrupt than their Democratic counterparts before and after Radical Reconstruction.

Document A:

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

-U.S. Constitution, Amendment XV (1870)

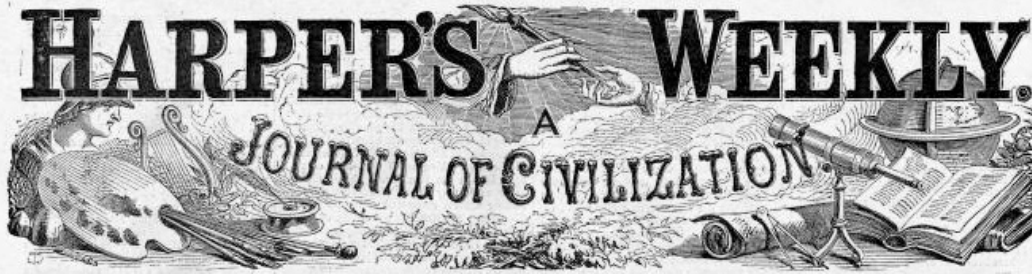
Document B: “The First Colored Senator and Representatives,”



Document C: "The First Vote," Harper's Weekly, November 16, 1867

HARPER'S WEEKLY.

A
JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION.

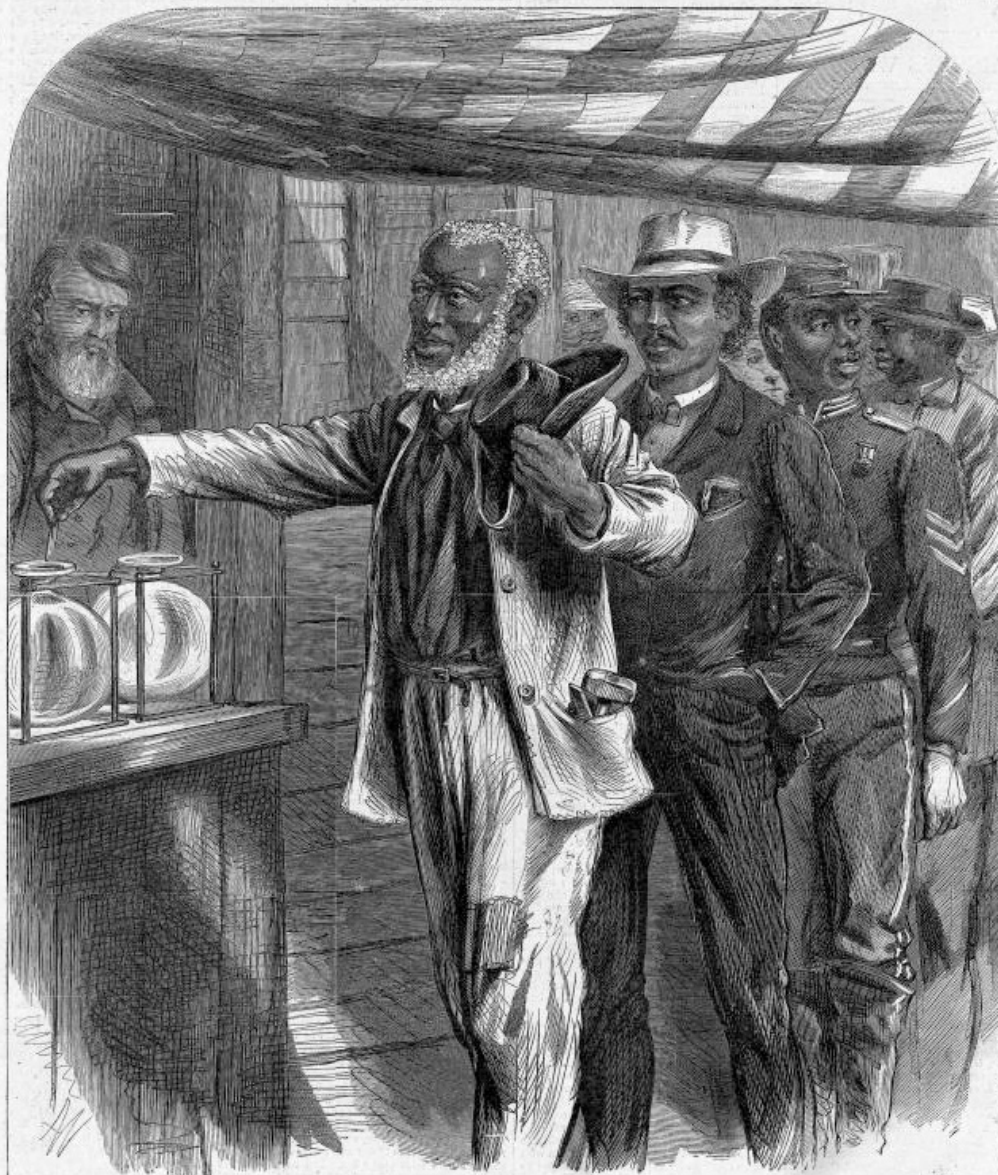


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NEW YORK, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1867.

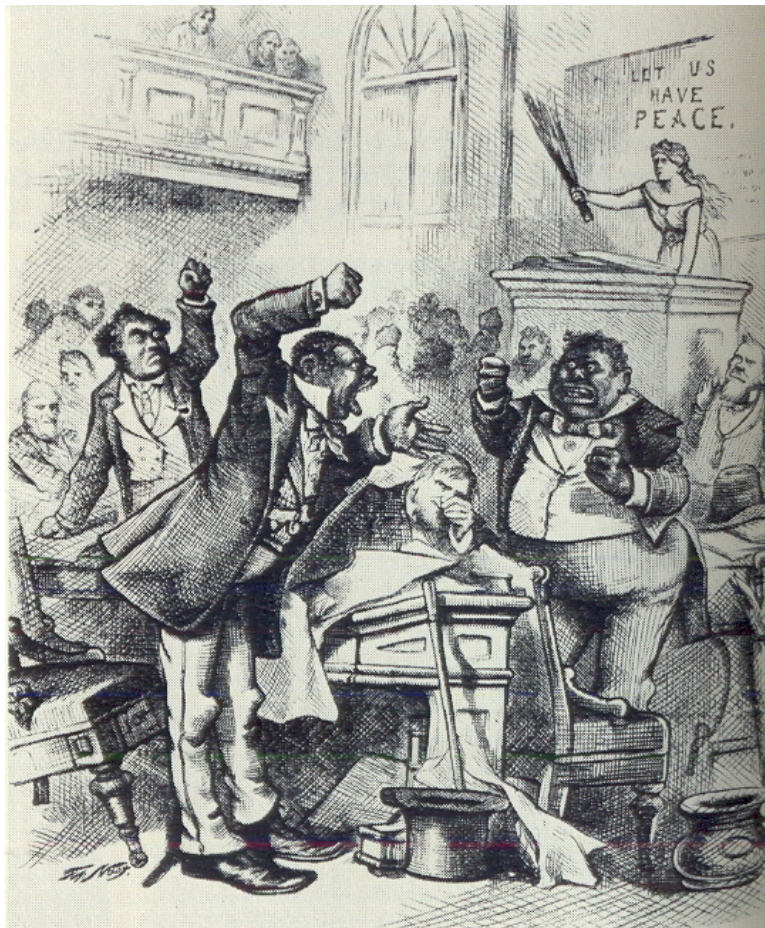
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"THE FIRST VOTE."—Drawn by A. R. WOOD.—[SEE NEXT PAGE.]

Document D: Thomas Nast, “Colored Rule in a Reconstructed (?) State,” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 14, 1874



Document E: Thomas Holt, “Negro State Legislators in South Carolina During the Reconstruction Era,” 1982

Certainly the cause of [the failure of Republican rule] cannot be laid to the political incapacity and inexperience of the black masses. They were uneducated. They were inexperienced. But they overcame these obstacles to forge a formidable political majority in the state that had led the South into secession. During the Reconstruction era 60 percent of South Carolina’s population was black. This popular majority was turned into a functioning political majority as soon as Reconstruction legislation was put into effect with the registration for the constitutional convention in 1867. Despite violence and economic intimidation, the black electorate grew rather than declined between 1868 and 1876. [...] [G]iven the political alternatives..., the black electorate could just as easily be credited with a high degree of political savvy... [...]

Ultimately the failures of South Carolina’s Republicans must be laid not to their black ex-slave constituents but to the party leadership... Clearly corruption was rife. But there were corrupt Democrats before, during, and after Reconstruction, including the architects of the Democratic campaign of 1876... Republican corruption merely offered a propagandistic advantage in the Democratic efforts to discredit the Radical regime.