

Anniversaries



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In his November 19, 1863, Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln famously described our country as “a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” He described the Civil War as a test of “whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” And he urged increased devotion to “the great task remaining before us...that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

In so many ways, the history of our country is that of a nation's struggle to live up to the principles of its founding. The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence begins: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal....” The Preamble to the United States Constitution begins: “We the People...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Part of our national struggle has been how to interpret phrases like “all men” and “We the People.” Whether or not Thomas Jefferson and the other signers of the Declaration had all humanity in mind, leaders like

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. seized the historical as well as the moral high ground by using the Declaration of Independence to demand equality for all.

This month's *Michigan Bar Journal* focuses on election law. As I write this, I have not yet seen any of the contributions. My hope, of course, is that the articles will be especially informative because the subject is so timely and important. The right to vote is the cornerstone of any representative government.

I think it important to note, especially given the context of this election law edition, that we are commemorating the anniversaries of the ratification of two significant voting rights amendments to the Constitution: 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the Fifteenth Amendment¹ and the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.²

The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified on February 3, 1870. It states:

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.

The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920. It states:

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 sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

To be sure, these amendments do not tell the complete story of the struggle for voting rights in our nation. But they both resulted from seminal movements in our history and should be celebrated as important steps in the ongoing effort to bring our nation into greater alignment with its founding principles.

On March 31, 1968, Dr. King said, “[l]et us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” As we explore the theme of election law, let us also commemorate these amendments, commemorate those who dedicated themselves to bending the arc of history toward justice, and dedicate ourselves to the ongoing effort to achieve the ideals of our nation's founding. ■

ENDNOTES

1. US Const, Am XV.
2. US Const, Am XIX.

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