

Timeline of Federal Civil Rights Laws

1866: Congress passes a law declaring all persons born in the U.S. to be citizens, regardless of race or color, guaranteeing the rights to make contracts, sue, bear witness in court and own private property.

1871: Congress passes a law providing for a cause of action in federal court for the interference with a federal civil right by a person acting under the authority of state law.

1875: Congress passes a law prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations based on race. Law is overturned as an unconstitutional exercise of congressional authority by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1883.

1945: Congress considers a civil rights bill for the first time in 70 years, but the legislation does not advance. A civil rights bill will be introduced every year until 1957, but none will make it to a floor vote in either chamber.

1957: Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first federal civil rights bill adopted since 1875. This legislation was crafted by the Eisenhower Justice Department to set up the federal government as protector of voting rights for African Americans. The bill created the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice and instituted a cause of action in federal court for the denial of voting rights. The bill almost failed in the Senate when Senator Strom Thurmond filibustered the legislation by speaking for over 24 consecutive hours on the Senate floor. In the end, it took a substantial compromise—striking the ability of the Attorney General to intervene in state civil rights cases and providing a trial by (in practice, all-white) jury in federal voting rights cases—to get the measure through Congress. This compromise divided the civil rights community.

1960: Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1960 which expanded the 1957 law by requiring election authorities to make registration records available for inspection by the Justice Department and by enabling federal judges to appoint referees to hear claims that state election officials had denied individuals the right to register and vote based on race. Again, Southern

Senators attempted to block its passage, with a group staging the longest filibuster—over 43 consecutive hours—in Senate history. A cloture vote ended disastrously, not even garnering a majority, and in the end the bill only passed the Senate when its proponents agreed to remove a more robust role for the Attorney General.

1963: Congress passes the Equal Pay Act of 1963 which prohibited wage differentials based on sex. As a part of the Fair Labor Standards Act, however, the provision requiring wage equity did not apply to executive, administrative or professional employees.

1964: Congress passes the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. This legislation was, at last, a robust civil rights law that barred discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin in employment, public accommodations and by recipients of federal funds. The bill only made it out of the House Judiciary Committee under the threat of a discharge petition and it had to, yet again, overcome a filibuster by Southern senators. The addition of “sex” as a protected category was, arguably, an attempt by a Texas representative to sabotage the bill. At the time of the adoption of this bill, 28 states had already enacted fair employment laws that prohibited discrimination on the basis of race.

1965: Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This finally thoroughly addressed the denial of voting rights based on race by outlawing literacy tests for voters, providing federal voter registration in areas of low minority registration, and providing Justice Department oversight of and approval for changes to voting laws in areas with low minority registration. Again, the bill had to overcome a concerted effort to filibuster.

1967: Congress passes the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. This legislation outlawed employment discrimination based on age (of persons 40 years of age or older).

1968: Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (also known as the Fair Housing Act). This outlawed discrimination in

housing based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

1968: Congress passes the Architectural Barriers Act. This required that facilities designed, built, altered, or leased with federal funds be accessible to persons with disabilities.

1972: Congress passes Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This legislation outlawed discrimination based on gender in education programs and activities which receive federal funding. Another provision of the Education Amendments also removed the “blue collar jobs” limitation on the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

1973: Congress passes the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This legislation prohibited discrimination based on disability in any program or activity receiving federal funding.

1974: Congress passes the Equal Educational Opportunities Act. This legislation prohibited segregating students on the basis of race, color or national origin, as well as discrimination against faculty and staff on those bases. This bill also required school districts to take action to overcome students' language barriers that impede equal participation in educational programs.

1975: Congress passes the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. In response to narrowing judicial interpretations of Title VII's prohibition on sex discrimination, this legislation was adopted to bar employment discrimination based on pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions.

1975: Congress passes the Age Discrimination Act of 1975. This legislation prohibited discrimination on the basis of age in any program or activity receiving federal funding.

1990: Congress passes the Americans with Disabilities Act. This legislation bolstered the Rehabilitation Act by prohibiting discrimination based on disability in employment and public accommodations. Congress affirmatively excluded transsexuals and current substance abusers from the bill's protections.