Disfranchisement refers to a constitutional amendment drafted by the 1899 North Carolina General Assembly [4] and approved in the general election in 1900 severely limiting African Americans' right to vote. The intent of disfranchisement was to repudiate the principle of universal male suffrage, especially black suffrage, and to replace it with laws that ensured that only literate white males could vote.

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Disfranchisement was worded in such a way that it circumvented the federal prohibition of overt racial
discrimination in voting procedures. Neutral on its face, it merely required prospective voters to pay a poll tax \[3\] and to pass a literacy test. However, the poll tax was costly to the poor and, of course, applied only to those intending to vote. In addition, in 1900 almost 30 percent of all voting-age males were illiterate, a disproportionate percentage of whom were poor African Americans. Further, the proposed amendment would operate in conjunction with new registration laws passed in 1899 that gave Democrats control of deciding which persons had properly registered. Finally, to appeal to some whites, the amendment included a grandfather clause \[2\] that allowed an illiterate to qualify if he or a lineal ancestor had been a registered voter before 1867-that is, prior to Congressional Reconstruction-provided he registered by 1908. The grandfather clause indicated that the short-term purpose of disfranchisement was to eliminate black voters.

The debate over the amendment reached its climax in the summer of 1900. Generally, Republicans and Populists opposed the measure, while Democrats, including gubernatorial candidate Charles B. Aycock \[12\], supported it. The greatest concern of Republicans and Populists was the potential disfranchisement of poor whites, not African Americans, yet many supported the amendment. In an election characterized by registration abuses by Democratic officials, more violence and intimidation on the part of Democratic ruffians and groups such as the Red Shirts \[13\], and elaborate demonstrations of white supremacists, the disfranchisement amendment passed easily.

The effect of the disfranchisement amendment on North Carolina elections was revolutionary. Between 1900 and 1902, white turnout plummeted and black turnout was almost nonexistent. Not until the 1960s, with the passage of strong federal voting rights legislation, did its continuing impact begin to dissipate.

References:

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