

Montgomery, Alabama, elects its first African-American mayor

Required Annotations	Student-Created Annotations	Summary / Questions / Reflection
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Student-created

Required (bold)

Making history, voters in Montgomery, Alabama, **decisively** elected Steven Reed on October 8, as the first African-American mayor in the 200 years since the city's founding.

Reed, already a trailblazer as Montgomery County's first black probate judge, defeated David Woods, owner of the local Fox **affiliate**, in a nonpartisan runoff election with 67 percent of the vote and all precincts reporting, according to the unofficial election results.

"This election has never been about me," Reed, age 45, said during his victory speech. "This election has never been about just my ideas. It's been about all of the hopes and dreams that we have as individuals and collectively in this city ... and the way we found the opportunity to improve outcomes regardless of neighborhood, regardless of zip code, regardless of anything that may divide us or make us different from one another."

His victory reverberated well beyond Montgomery as many celebrated the milestone in a city remembered as both the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of the civil rights movement. Montgomery, where about 60 percent of residents are black, was the first capital of the Confederate States of America, becoming a bastion of racial violence and discrimination in the Jim Crow era, but also of protests and resistance in the civil rights era.

It's home to the Montgomery bus boycott against segregation led by Rosa Parks, and it's home to the Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights led by Martin Luther King Jr. It was in Montgomery where, after the third march in March 1965, King addressed a crowd of 25,000 people on the steps of the Alabama Capitol, famously saying, "The **arc** of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

"This is a historic day for our nation," Karen Baynes-Dunning, interim president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is based in Montgomery, said on October 8, on Twitter. "The election of Steven Reed, the first black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, symbolizes the new inclusive and forward-thinking South that so many have worked to achieve."

In an op-ed, the Montgomery Advertiser's editor described Reed's win as being "for the thousands of civil rights foot soldiers whose names we rarely say but whose legacy lives forever."

"Do not underestimate what this means to generations of people who fought hard for the man who looks like Reed to hold the city's highest office," executive editor Bro Krift wrote. "Do not **depreciate** what it means to parents of the youth of this city who look like Reed and who now have a man they can hold up as an example."

Reed, born and raised in Montgomery, worked various jobs in finance and in the Alabama legislature, as an aid to former Democratic lieutenant governor Jim Folsom Jr. before turning to local government in Montgomery. Reed became the youngest and first black probate judge in Montgomery County in 2012 — and the first probate judge in the state to issue same-sex marriage licenses in 2015.

The father of two told the Advertiser earlier this year that he decided to run for mayor after growing dissatisfied with the state of public education and safety, deciding he didn't need to look to anyone else to fix the problems but himself.

"Are you going to sit on the sidelines and complain and throw stuff at the TV

about what you could do better or are you going to run to really make a difference?" he told the newspaper.

His rise in politics, in some ways, follows in the footsteps of his father, himself a political trailblazer and civil rights advocate in Montgomery. Joe L. Reed was elected to the Montgomery City Council in 1975 along with three other African-Americans, making them the first black politicians to hold elected office in the city since the Reconstruction era, according to the book "Closed Ranks: The Whitehurst Case in Post-Civil Rights Montgomery."

The **influx** of black officeholders that year was largely thanks to Montgomery's overhaul of its local political system. Before 1975, the mayor and two at-large commissioners were elected by all residents of Montgomery, rather than having a city council with members belonging to specific districts. Back then, black residents were in the minority, making it difficult for black candidates to win citywide seats, the Advertiser reported.

At the time of Joe Reed's election, he was already fighting for civil rights. As a student at Alabama State College, he participated in lunch counter sit-ins in 1960, fighting to end segregation in Montgomery. He went on to become a longtime leader in the Alabama Democratic Conference, successfully suing over gerrymandering that diminished the black vote. He served on the city council until 1999, and was known to spar often with Mayor Emory Folmar — described in a 1987 Chicago Tribune dispatch as "the most popular and efficient mayor in Montgomery's history and reviled as its most racist and divisive." Announcing his candidacy for re-election that year, he proclaimed race a "dead issue."

Folmar, the longest-serving Montgomery mayor, with a 22-year **tenure**, initially took office in 1977 in the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of a fleeing, unarmed black man, Bernard Whitehurst, who was mistaken for a robbery suspect — a case that would impact the black community's relationship with police for years to come. "Rather than take steps to identify and correct the problem, it seems that Folmar's actions made things worse," the Journal of the Southern Regional Council observed in 1983.

Since Folmar's exit from office in 1999, only two other mayors have held office. The most recent, Mayor Todd Strange, decided not to seek re-election this year after a decade in office. Ten of the 12 candidates running to replace him were black.

Steven Reed's platform centered on investing in universal prekindergarten, eliminating food deserts and beefing up the Montgomery police force, which most candidates argued was understaffed.

On the night of October 8, Reed did not address his status as the city's first black mayor, but acknowledged its significance hours before the numbers were finally tallied, speaking to the Advertiser.

"I take that with a great deal of humility and a great deal of responsibility, what that means to so many people who have been a part of Montgomery who have lived here and left here because of the racial terror they underwent and moved far, far away," Reed said. "And what it means to the people who stayed here and continue to chip away and who definitely want to see someone in this position that looks like them. I think I had to kind of take a step back ... It's way bigger than just Steven Reed."

Questions (The questions themselves are online.)

Questions

1. Read the following quote from the article.

"This is a historic day for our nation," Karen Baynes-Dunning, interim president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is based in Montgomery, said on October 8, on Twitter. "The election of Steven Reed, the first black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, symbolizes the new inclusive and forward-thinking South that so many have worked to achieve."

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the quote above?

- a) The past history of the South has now been forever altered because of the election of Steven Reed.
 - b) The election of Steven Reed as first black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, will reduce poverty in the South.
 - c) Twitter helped to make the election of Steven Reed as first black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, possible.
 - d) The traditional view of the South has been of a place that discriminates against those who are different.
2. Which of the following claims does the author support the LEAST?
 - a) The election of Reed was significant to Montgomery's black community.
 - b) In some ways, Reed's involvement in politics followed in the footsteps of his father.
 - c) A change in Montgomery's political system helped to make the election of Reed possible.
 - d) Reed's election as mayor is especially significant to people who left Montgomery due to racial issues.
 3. How has Montgomery, Alabama, changed over time?
 - a) It began as a city that embraced Confederate values during the Civil War, and then over the years became the leader in granting civil rights to its black residents.
 - b) It began as a city that embraced Confederate values during the Civil War, and then during the civil rights era, changed into a city that completely rejected discrimination.
 - c) It was a small town during the Civil War period, became a capital after the war ended and then became a leader of civil rights after the Jim Crow era ended.
 - d) It began as the capital of the Confederate states, then became a place of racial violence and discrimination and eventually became a center of civil rights protests.
 4. How does the author describe Steven Reed over the course of the article?
 - a) as a man full of ambition whose goal was to constantly make history in the positions he held
 - b) as a family man whose interest in politics originated from his desire to improve the world for his children
 - c) as a man whose interest in politics began at the state level and then transitioned to the local level
 - d) as a man whose entry into the world of politics was sudden and completely unexpected