



# **When the Letter Betrays the Spirit: Voting Rights Enforcement and African American Participation from Lyndon Johnson to Barack Obama**

*Tyson D. King-Meadows*

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When the Letter Betrays the Spirit examines the wide latitude provided to the executive branch and to the Supreme Court by the text of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Drawing from government enforcement data, legislative history, Supreme Court rulings, the 2006 reauthorization debate on the VRA, and from the 2007 scandal involving the firing of U.S. attorneys under the Bush Administration, the book examines when, why, and how executive and judicial discretion facilitates violation of voting rights. Connecting Johnson to Obama, the book outlines why the executive-centered model of voting rights enforcement relegates Congress to the sidelines, and outlines why a Congress-centered approach provides the best protection against the effects of the law enforcement axiom: the law is neither self-executing nor self-interpreting. The book also examines 2008 survey results about public support for a Jim Crow-era election reform policy that would require voters to read a passage of the Constitution. Describing the civic literacy dimensions of voting rights law from *Shaw v. Reno* (1993) to *Northwest Austin Utility v. Holder* (2009), the book highlights the complicated nature of the post-racial rhetoric surrounding the 2008 election cycle and surrounding the upcoming post-2010 census redistricting cycles.

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