Mattie Clark, South Burlington VT

Vermont has a long history of progressive ideals, but our record shows that moral leadership has not always translated into equal protection under the law. While Vermont abolished slavery early, equality did not arrive alongside abolition, nor was it sustained through consistent constitutional enforcement. This gap between professed values and lived legal reality reflects a broader national pattern rooted in the unfinished work of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction represented a high-water mark of constitutional possibility in the United States. Through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the nation recognized that freedom without equal protection is incomplete, and that liberty must be secured through enforceable constitutional guarantees rather than deferred to culture, reputation, or gradual change. Yet as the political will to sustain Reconstruction waned, that promise was not fully defended. The nation, including northern states, grew weary of the work required to translate constitutional principle into lived equality.

In Vermont, as elsewhere, this retreat took several forms.

First, freedom was affirmed without a corresponding commitment to enforce equal civil rights. Black Vermonters were legally free but did not experience equal access to employment, education, housing, or civic participation. Equality was treated as a matter of social evolution rather than a constitutional duty.

Second, as federal enforcement of Reconstruction collapsed in the late nineteenth century, Vermont did not insist on preserving or expanding equal protection at the state level. The narrowing of the Fourteenth Amendment through judicial interpretation and political compromise was largely accepted rather than resisted.

Third, exclusion persisted through ostensibly neutral laws and local practices. While Vermont did not adopt overt Jim Crow statutes, segregation and inequity were maintained through custom, economic barriers, and local governance, rarely treated as constitutional failures requiring remedy.

Fourth, civil rights protections often arrived incrementally and unevenly, frequently following federal action rather than leading it. The absence of explicit discriminatory statutes created the illusion that equality had been secured, even as unequal treatment persisted in practice.

Fifth, Vermont increasingly relied on its moral reputation—its abolitionist history and progressive self-image—as a substitute for constitutional accountability. Identity replaced obligation. Values replaced enforcement.

Today, we face a moment that bears troubling resemblance to the post-Reconstruction backlash. Across the nation, equal protection is once again contested, narrowed, or treated as negotiable. History shows that constitutional regression does not always arrive through overt hostility; it often advances through fatigue, caution, and the quiet temptation of comfort. When the work of justice feels politically risky or socially inconvenient, delay is framed as prudence and inaction as moderation.

These patterns remind us that our espoused values of Freedom and Unity alone are not safeguards. As Martin Luther King Jr. warned, the call to wait, the “tranquilizing drug of gradualism”, has too often served as a rationale for abandoning constitutional responsibility. Proposal 4 matters because it meets this moment with clarity rather than caution. It places equal protection where it belongs: in the Constitution of the State of Vermont. By advancing Proposal 4, Vermont has the opportunity to resist retreat, reject complacency, and lead—not through reputation or comfort, but through the durable enforcement of constitutional equality.

In truth and justice,
Mattie Clark
South Burlington, VT