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# Civil Rights Movement

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The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Black Americans to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The [Civil War](#) officially abolished [slavery](#), but it didn't end discrimination against Black people—they continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South. By the mid-20th century, Black Americans, along with many other Americans, mobilized and began an unprecedented fight for equality that spanned two decades.

# Jim Crow Laws

During [Reconstruction](#), Black people took on leadership roles like never before. They held public office and sought legislative changes for equality and the right to vote.

In 1868, the [14th Amendment](#) to the Constitution gave Black people equal protection under the law. In 1870, the [15th Amendment](#) granted Black American men the right to vote. Still, many white Americans, especially those in the South, were unhappy that people they'd once enslaved were now on a more-or-less equal playing field.

To marginalize Black people, keep them separate from white people and erase the progress they'd made during Reconstruction, "[Jim Crow](#)" laws were established in the South beginning in the late 19th century. Black people couldn't use the same public facilities as white people, live in many of the same towns or go to the same schools. Interracial marriage was illegal, and most Black people couldn't vote because they were unable to pass voter literacy tests.

Jim Crow laws weren't adopted in northern states; however, Black people still experienced discrimination at their jobs or when they tried to buy a house or get an education. To make matters worse, laws were passed in some states to limit voting rights for Black Americans.

Moreover, southern segregation gained ground in 1896 when the U.S. Supreme Court declared in [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) that facilities for Black and white people could be “separate but equal.”

## World War II and Civil Rights

Prior to [World War II](#), most Black people worked as low-wage farmers, factory workers, domestics or servants. By the early 1940s, war-related work was booming, but most Black Americans weren’t given better-paying jobs. They were also discouraged from joining the military.

After thousands of Black people threatened to march on Washington to demand equal employment rights, President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941. It opened national defense jobs and other government jobs to all Americans regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.

Black men and women served heroically in World War II, despite suffering segregation and discrimination during their deployment. The [Tuskegee Airmen](#) broke the racial barrier to become the first Black military aviators in the U.S. Army Air Corps and earned more than 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses. Yet many Black veterans were met with prejudice and scorn upon returning home. This was a stark contrast to why America had entered the war to begin with—to defend freedom and democracy in the world.

As the Cold War began, President [Harry Truman](#) initiated a civil rights agenda, and in 1948 issued Executive Order 9981 to end discrimination in the military. These events helped set the stage for grass-roots initiatives to enact racial equality legislation and incite the civil rights movement.

## Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, a 42-year-old woman named [Rosa Parks](#) found a seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus after work. Segregation laws at the time stated Black passengers must sit in designated seats at the back of the bus, and Parks complied.

When a white man got on the bus and couldn’t find a seat in the white section at the front of the bus, the bus driver instructed Parks and three other Black passengers to give up their seats. Parks refused and was arrested.

As word of her arrest ignited outrage and support, Parks unwittingly became the “mother of the modern-day civil rights movement.” Black community leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) led by Baptist minister [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), a role which would place him front and center in the fight for civil rights.

Parks’ courage incited the MIA to stage a [boycott of the Montgomery bus system](#). The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted 381 days. On November 14, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled segregated seating was unconstitutional.

## Little Rock Nine

In 1954, the civil rights movement gained momentum when the United States Supreme Court made segregation illegal in public schools in the case of [Brown v. Board of Education](#). In 1957, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas asked for volunteers from all-Black high schools to attend the formerly segregated school.

On September 4, 1957, nine Black students, known as the [Little Rock Nine](#), arrived at [Central High School](#) to begin classes but were instead met by the Arkansas National Guard (on order of Governor Orval Faubus) and a screaming, threatening mob. The Little Rock Nine tried again a couple of weeks later and made it inside, but had to be removed for their safety when violence ensued.

Finally, President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) intervened and [ordered federal troops](#) to escort the Little Rock Nine to and from classes at Central High. Still, the students faced continual harassment and prejudice.

Their efforts, however, brought much-needed attention to the issue of desegregation and fueled protests on both sides of the issue.

## Civil Rights Act of 1957

Even though all Americans had gained the right to vote, many southern states made it difficult for Black citizens. They often required prospective voters of color to take literacy tests that were confusing, misleading and nearly impossible to pass.

Wanting to show a commitment to the civil rights movement and minimize racial tensions in the South, the Eisenhower administration pressured Congress to consider new civil rights legislation.

On September 9, 1957, President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 into law, the first major civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. It allowed federal prosecution of anyone who tried to prevent someone from voting. It also created a commission to investigate voter fraud.

## Sit-In at Woolworth's Lunch Counter

Despite making some gains, Black Americans still experienced blatant prejudice in their daily lives. On February 1, 1960, four college students took a stand against segregation in Greensboro, North Carolina when they refused to leave a [Woolworth's lunch counter](#) without being served.

Over the next several days, hundreds of people joined their cause in what became known as the Greensboro sit-ins. After some were arrested and charged with trespassing, protesters launched a boycott of all segregated lunch counters until the owners caved and the original four students were finally served at the Woolworth's lunch counter where they'd first stood their ground.

Their efforts spearheaded peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations in dozens of cities and helped launch the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) to encourage all students to get involved in the civil rights movement. It also caught the eye of young college graduate [Stokely Carmichael](#), who joined the SNCC during the [Freedom Summer](#) of 1964 to register Black voters in Mississippi. In 1966, Carmichael became the chair of the SNCC, giving his famous speech in which he originated the phrase "Black power."

## Freedom Riders

On May 4, 1961, 13 "[Freedom Riders](#)"—seven Black and six white activists—mounted a Greyhound bus in [Washington, D.C.](#), embarking on a bus tour of the American south to protest segregated bus terminals. They were testing the 1960 decision by the Supreme Court in *Boynton v. Virginia* that declared the segregation of interstate transportation facilities unconstitutional.

Facing violence from both police officers and white protesters, the Freedom Rides drew international attention. On Mother's Day 1961, the bus reached Anniston, Alabama, where a mob mounted the bus and threw a bomb into it. The Freedom Riders escaped the burning bus but were badly beaten. Photos of the bus engulfed in flames were widely circulated, and the group could not find a bus driver to take

them further. U.S. Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy](#) (brother to President [John F. Kennedy](#)) negotiated with Alabama Governor John Patterson to find a suitable driver, and the Freedom Riders resumed their journey under police escort on May 20. But the officers left the group once they reached Montgomery, where a white mob brutally attacked the bus. Attorney General Kennedy responded to the riders—and a call from Martin Luther King Jr.—by sending federal marshals to Montgomery.

On May 24, 1961, a group of Freedom Riders reached Jackson, Mississippi. Though met with hundreds of supporters, the group was arrested for trespassing in a “whites-only” facility and sentenced to 30 days in jail. Attorneys for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ([NAACP](#)) brought the matter to the U.S. Supreme Court, which reversed the convictions. Hundreds of new Freedom Riders were drawn to the cause, and the rides continued.

In the fall of 1961, under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations prohibiting segregation in interstate transit terminals

## March on Washington

Arguably one of the most famous events of the civil rights movement took place on August 28, 1963: the [March on Washington](#). It was organized and attended by civil rights leaders such as [A. Philip Randolph](#), [Bayard Rustin](#) and Martin Luther King Jr.

More than 200,000 people of all races congregated in Washington, D. C. for the peaceful march with the main purpose of forcing civil rights legislation and establishing job equality for everyone. The highlight of the march was King’s speech in which he continually stated, “I have a dream...”

King’s “[I Have a Dream](#)” speech galvanized the national civil rights movement and became a slogan for equality and freedom.

## Civil Rights Act of 1964

President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) signed the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#)—legislation initiated by President [John F. Kennedy](#) before his [assassination](#)—into law on July 2 of that year.

King and other civil rights activists witnessed the signing. The law guaranteed equal employment for all, limited the use of voter literacy tests and allowed federal authorities to ensure public facilities were integrated.

## Bloody Sunday

On March 7, 1965, the civil rights movement in Alabama took an especially violent turn as 600 peaceful demonstrators participated in the [Selma to Montgomery march](#) to protest the killing of Black civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson by a white police officer and to encourage legislation to enforce the 15th amendment.

As the protesters neared the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were blocked by Alabama state and local police sent by Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, a vocal opponent of desegregation. Refusing to stand down, protesters moved forward and were viciously beaten and teargassed by police and dozens of protesters were hospitalized.

The entire incident was televised and became known as "[Bloody Sunday](#)." Some activists wanted to retaliate with violence, but King pushed for nonviolent protests and eventually gained federal protection for another march.

## Voting Rights Act of 1965

When President Johnson signed the [Voting Rights Act](#) into law on August 6, 1965, he took the Civil Rights Act of 1964 several steps further. The new law banned all voter literacy tests and provided federal examiners in certain voting jurisdictions.

It also allowed the attorney general to contest state and local poll taxes. As a result, poll taxes were later declared unconstitutional in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections* in 1966.

Part of the Act was walked back decades later, in 2013, when a Supreme Court decision ruled that Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional, holding that the constraints placed on certain states and federal review of states' voting procedures were outdated.

## Civil Rights Leaders Assassinated



The civil rights movement had tragic consequences for two of its leaders in the late 1960s. On February 21, 1965, former Nation of Islam leader and Organization of Afro-American Unity founder [Malcolm X](#) was [assassinated](#) at a rally.

On April 4, 1968, civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Martin Luther King Jr. was [assassinated](#) on his hotel room's balcony. Emotionally-charged looting and riots followed, putting even more pressure on the Johnson administration to push through additional civil rights laws.

## Fair Housing Act of 1968

The [Fair Housing Act](#) became law on April 11, 1968, just days after King's assassination. It prevented housing discrimination based on race, sex, national origin and religion. It was also the last legislation enacted during the civil rights era.

The civil rights movement was an empowering yet precarious time for Black Americans. The efforts of civil rights activists and countless protesters of all races brought about legislation to end segregation, Black voter suppression and discriminatory employment and housing practices.

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