

The civil rights movement was a mass popular movement to secure for African Americans equal access to and opportunities for the basic privileges and rights of U.S. citizenship. Although the roots of the movement go back to the 19th century, it peaked in the 1950s and 1960s.

- African American men and women, along with whites, organized and led the movement at national and local levels. They pursued their goals through legal means, negotiations, petitions, and nonviolent protest demonstrations.
- The civil rights movement was largest social movement of the 20th century in the United States. It influenced the modern women's rights movement and the student movement of the 1960s.
- The civil rights movement centered on the American South. That was where the African American population was concentrated and where racial inequality in education, economic opportunity, and the political and legal processes was most blatant.

Beginning in the late 19th century, state and local governments passed segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws; they also imposed restrictions on voting qualifications that left the black population economically and politically powerless. The movement therefore addressed primarily three areas of discrimination: education, social segregation, and voting rights.

The Brown Decision

This landmark decision (1954) outlawed racial segregation in public schools. Whites around the country condemned the decision. In the South such white supremacist groups as the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens' Council organized to resist desegregation, sometimes resorting to violence.

One of the first attempts to comply with the *Brown* decision came in Arkansas's capital city, Little Rock, in 1957. When the local school board admitted nine black students to the city's previously all-white Central High School, white protests escalated into violence. As a result, President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to protect the black students. A later high-profile case involved Alabama governor George Wallace. In 1963 he attempted to block black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.

The Challenge to Social Segregation

By the time of the Little Rock incident, the nation had already become aware of the heightened struggle in the South. In 1955 blacks in Montgomery organized a boycott of city buses in protest of the policy of segregated seating. Instigated by Rosa Parks, the boycott lasted 381 days; it succeeded in integrating the seating. It also led to the formation in 1957 of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This was presided over by a local black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1960 four students from the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College initiated sit-ins at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. Students from other southern black colleges and universities followed with similar sit-ins, bringing about the

desegregation of several hundred lunch counters. During the sit-ins the young protesters organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

SNCC members joined forces with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and organized the Freedom Rides of 1961. Black and white Freedom Riders boarded commercial buses in Washington, D.C., and embarked on a route through the South; their objective was to test the 1960 Supreme Court decision *Boynton v. Virginia*, which had outlawed segregation in interstate transportation terminals. Riders were beaten, arrested, and in one instance had their bus burned. Nevertheless, the Freedom Rides were ultimately successful, prompting the U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce the ruling in *Boynton*.

Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson maneuvered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress. Representing a major victory for African Americans, the 1964 legislation outlawed segregation in public places and prohibited racial and gender discrimination in employment practices.

Voting Rights

By the mid-1960s, however, most eligible black voters in the South remained disfranchised. Following World War II, African Americans initiated local efforts to exercise the right to vote but faced strong and sometimes violent resistance from local whites. Organized initiatives to enfranchise blacks climaxed with the Summer Project of 1964.

The voter-registration effort did, however, capture the attention of many lawmakers, who began calling for federal voting-rights legislation.

Such legislation was enacted following events in Selma, Alabama. King and the SCLC went there in February 1965.

Black Power

By this time, civil rights activists were turning their attention to race discrimination in the urban North and West. Many younger activists, discontented with the slow process of change, were also becoming more militant. Most controversial were the call for racial separatism and the principle of self-defense against white violence. These tenets were contrary to the ideals of more traditional activists who favored racial integration and passive resistance. A leading group within the black-power struggle was the Black Panthers. By the mid-1970s, however, the black-power movement had faded. It never gained the support of the larger African American populace.

The Movement Legacy

As late as 1969, 15 years after *Brown*, only 1 percent of the black students in the Deep South were attending public schools with whites. After a series of legal cases in the late 1960s, the federal courts finally dismantled segregated schools. By this time — after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968; the rise of black militancy; and discernible gains in black employment opportunities — the civil rights movement had begun losing momentum. It produced major legislation that reformed American society. It opened up new political, social, and economic opportunities to blacks. Veterans of the movement, however, lament that it fell short of addressing the economic needs of poor Americans.