

# American History Online

## Civil Rights movement

Social, legal, and political movement that took place in the 1950s and 1960s with the intent of ending [discrimination](#) against African Americans across the United States. The 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka](#) Supreme Court decision was an enormous victory for the old-line civil rights organizations like the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) and had a critical psychological impact on millions of Americans. A year later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and triggered the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#), which thrust Martin Luther King Jr. into a leadership role and made him a national figure. In 1957, the [Little Rock Nine](#) captured the national spotlight in their effort to integrate Central High School in Arkansas, and the [freedom riders](#) and the [sit-in movement](#) gained attention in 1960 and 1961. Thousands of Americans, white and black, were demonstrating across the South in an effort to end segregation in stores, restaurants, hotels, libraries, and all public places. Fair housing and equal employment opportunities were also a major concern. Voter registration drives, particularly in Mississippi, gained force through the efforts of the activities of volunteers working with the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) and the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#).

Tactics ranged from legal and judicial action to picketing, marches, demonstrations, voter registration, and various forms of [civil disobedience](#). Thousands of civil rights demonstrators were arrested, and hundreds were beaten. Scores of churches and homes were dynamited, and a number of activists were murdered, among them Martin Luther King Jr., [Medgar Evers](#), [James Chaney](#), [Andrew Goodman](#), [Michael Schwerner](#), Rev. [George Lee](#), Lamar Smith, Herbert Lee, [Jimmie Lee Jackson](#), Rev. [James Reeb](#), [Viola Liuzzo](#), and Vernon Dahmer.

One reason for the success of the Civil Rights movement was the presence of television cameras that captured the readiness of police to ignore and/or indulge in criminal behavior in order to suppress peaceful civil rights demonstrations. The televised brutality infuriated millions of Americans, who put tremendous pressure on Congress and the White House to pass civil rights legislation.

Although the movement's emphasis on nonviolent action drew on the sentiments of Mohandas Gandhi and Henry Thoreau, the idea of nonviolent, passive sacrifice, even to the point of martyrdom, is basic to Christian tradition and was readily accepted by movement leaders, most of whom were Christian ministers. This interweaving of civil rights strategy and Christian religious thought attracted the support of thousands of churches, white as well as black. The many Jews, nonpracticing Christians, and those of other faiths who were also deeply involved in the movement accepted the leadership requirement that they "go limp" and respond nonviolently even when beaten. The nonviolent tactics used by civil rights demonstrators not only attracted widespread religious support but also allowed television cameras to cast them in a heroic light and permitted a minority group (blacks were approximately 10 percent of the U.S. population) with little economic and political leverage to gain the moral high ground.

The movement was also helped by the fact that the country had only recently emerged from World War II and the Korean conflict, and patriotic feeling was strong. The black protesters were lawfully demanding basic rights already guaranteed them by the U.S. Constitution. They were asking for fair and equal treatment in a country that prided itself on its democratic traditions. This struck a resounding chord among millions of whites who viewed themselves as patriotic Americans. Moreover, because of the "cold war" with the Soviet Union, the U.S. government was under pressure to demonstrate its commitment to democracy. This was especially true in regard to new countries that had recently emerged from colonial status. The fact that the country was in a period of prosperity also encouraged a generosity of spirit.

The presidency of [Lyndon Johnson](#) was of critical importance. A Texan who had grown up in poverty and who was well aware of the cruelty of discrimination, Johnson used his considerable political skills to push through the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) and the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). He also appointed a number of judges, including Thurgood Marshall, who were supportive of civil rights demands.

Other factors in the movement's success included a strong belief in the integrity of the civil rights leadership and the ability of the leadership to put forth precise, obtainable demands that could be readily met through legal and/or political action. Also important was the leadership's ability to provide a framework, in terms of marches, petitions, demonstrations, etc., through which thousands of ordinary people could make their concerns felt. While thousands of whites supported civil rights, the movement grew out of,

and was solidly anchored in, black institutions and organizations, particularly the black churches, the black colleges, and the black civil rights organizations.

### **Further Information**

PBS television series *Eyes on the Prize* by Juan Williams.

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