

The Civil Rights Movement: 1968—2008

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The civil rights movement did not end in 1968. It shifted to a new phase. The long official story line of the [civil rights movement](#) runs from Montgomery to Memphis, from the [1955 bus boycott](#) that introduced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) to the nation, to the final 1968 struggle where an assassin stole his life. The shock, grief, and rage that ensued, in the conventional account, become the veritable end of the movement. All that followed is treated as incidental to, if not decline or detour from, the glory days of struggle. But that endpoint obscures far more than it illuminates, a new generation of scholarship has revealed. “This is just the beginning,” announced Dr. King’s brother, A. D. King, as the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike Martin had been supporting achieved a landmark victory weeks after his death. It is now clear that A. D. King was more prescient than the pundits from whom first-wave historians took their cue. What journalists took as the end of the movement marked, instead, a shift to a new phase in which the reforms the movement won and the ongoing obstacles it confronted created a new and more complex terrain of struggle.

The civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s set the stage for the real work of equality in jobs, education, politics, and the military. Looking back, it’s clear now that the real work of winning equal treatment began **after** the legislative victories once thought to signal the movement’s denouement. The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) did not simply open public accommodations, such as lunch counters and bus stations. It made possible the first large-scale progress in [breaking down job segregation](#), a primary goal of civil rights activists from at least the 1940s onward. Using the Act’s Title VII, which outlawed employment discrimination, hundreds of thousands of workers ended their exclusion from higher-paying jobs and stopped discrimination in benefits, promotions, and day-to-day treatment. While some fought discrimination using the Civil Rights Act, other black workers organized to improve conditions in their existing jobs, as the Memphis sanitation strike inspired a vast wave of union organizing. Led by black municipal and hospital workers, the public sector became the best organized part of the U.S. labor market over the next two decades. There, African American men and women, especially, achieved their greatest income and promotion gains.

In the area of school segregation, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and subsequent court victories enabled other activists to make the first significant headway in breaking down since the Supreme Court had issued its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision over a decade before. Still others, using the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), opened electoral politics to African American voters and candidates as never before. In the South, the impact was stunning, as newly enfranchised black voters partnered with liberal and moderate whites to elect more African Americans than the region had seen since Reconstruction. In the cities of the North and West, black communities gained representation as never before. Nationally, forty-three black candidates won election as mayor in 1973, a number that quintupled over the next fifteen years.

As African Americans gained new access to white-dominated institutions, the freedom struggle moved inside from the streets. On college campuses, black students fought for and won the creation of Afro-American Studies programs and financial aid policies that would allow children of lower-income families to get college educations. In the military, one of the largest employers of African Americans, affirmative action and other policies produced one of the most racially equitable workplaces in the nation—indeed, the only one in which whites routinely have black supervisors. In just about every occupation, from auto work to librarianship, black caucuses arose to create a “safe space” where members would no longer be lonely “tokens”; they could raise consciousness about white privilege and organize for fair treatment and other institutional changes. The [Congressional Black Caucus](#) was only the best-publicized and most influential of these. Created in 1969 by [Shirley Chisholm](#) (D-NY, 1924-2005) and others, it joined together a new critical mass of African American representatives as it enabled them to speak with a common voice on issues of concern to their constituents.



Shirley Chisholm

After the 1960s the civil rights movement confronted new issues and forged new alliances. The new stage of struggle also saw more active coalition-building with other groups affected by discrimination and inequality. Blacks and Jews had worked together in the early postwar decades to secure anti-discrimination measures. After 1968, Blacks and Latinos and Asian Americans sometimes joined together in campaigns for substantive equal treatment and better life chances. Campuses saw “Third World Coalitions” surge in the 1970s over shared demands for ethnic studies programs and affirmative action or open admissions, for example. Mainstream civil rights groups and feminist groups supported one another’s lawsuits to end discriminatory employment and open institutions to all. Black and Puerto Rican activists built coalitions with white feminists to end the practice of sterilization abuse, which targeted women of color, and to seek a broad range of reproductive rights, including quality child care and maternal and child health care. Poor black women in the welfare rights movement, for their part, sometimes found stronger allies among liberal white women and progressive Catholics than among mainstream male-led civil rights groups fearful of being associated with unmarried mothers seeking better public assistance.

Even with the legislative victories of the 1960s, many obstacles to equality remained, especially in employment and housing. Still, efforts to promote equity and inclusion throughout American society faced daunting road blocks, and it was clear as early as the mid-1960s that they would not be removed easily. Two and a half centuries of slavery and another hundred years of pervasive discrimination had left deep imprints on all American institutions. Every industry that

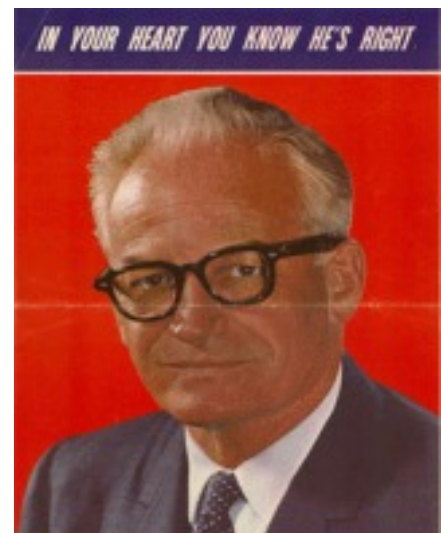
employed African Americans had developed its own variant of entrenched occupational segregation. The housing markets of every major metropolitan area bore the marks of decades of restrictive covenants and [real estate red-lining](#), and of postwar white flight to homogenous suburbs. School systems, honoring those dividing lines and funded by unequal property taxes, systematically underserved black children. In the North as well as the South, they left black youth ill-prepared for an emerging labor market that demanded ever-higher levels of education to achieve economic security. Rather, as the mechanization of southern cotton picking and demise of sharecropping led millions of [migrants to head to the cities of the North and West](#) from the 1940s through the 1960s, hopes of good jobs met the reality of vast structural unemployment due to automation and later de-industrialization, and declining urban tax bases due to suburbanization.

Economic equality lagged behind social and political equality, especially in the nation's cities. All these influences conspired, by the late twentieth century, to produce unprecedented levels of concentrated poverty in the nation's inner cities, poverty from which escape was well-nigh impossible for most residents. The cumulative result caught the notice of growing numbers of social scientists by century's end, who documented a vast "wealth gap" between blacks and whites. Afflicting higher earners along with the poor, it came from having been systematically cut off over generations from being able to buy homes in neighborhoods where home values appreciated. That "asset poverty," as it came to be called, made "[self-help](#)," strong as that tradition was in black history, a steep and slippery climb. Combined with harsh drug laws passed after the 1970s, all these forms of structural inequality contributed to. After the 1960s a rising movement mounted a political challenge to efforts aimed at expanding equality. surging black incarceration rates that put the United States on par with some of the most repressive nations of the world in the proportion of its citizenry that lived behind bars.

The challenges post-1968 civil rights activists faced were political as well as economic, as a rising conservative movement defended the arrangements they sought to challenge. The origins of that movement go back to the late 1930s, as congressional representatives of northern business blocked with southern segregationists to resist expansion of the New Deal. But the movement began to build in earnest after 1955, when [William F. Buckley](#) (1925-2008) founded *National Review* magazine as its organizing center. From the beginning, he and his publisher, the Republican party activist William Rusher, looked to southern whites opposed to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the wider civil rights struggle as a prime constituency for their cause. That base grew to mass proportions when [Senator Barry Goldwater](#) (1909-1998) ran for the presidency in 1964. Goldwater had gained fame across Dixie for his opposition to the Civil Rights Act earlier that year; King called him “the most dangerous man in America.” Though he won only the states of the Deep South and his home state of Arizona, his run galvanized a grassroots right that also defeated fair housing in California that year. [Ronald Reagan](#) (1911-2004), a spokesperson for both causes, became the all-time most popular spokesperson of conservatives, winning first the governorship of California in 1966 and later the U.S. presidency in 1980. From *Brown* forward, in fact, the conservative movement and its leaders in Congress opposed every major measure sought by civil rights activists and rallied many wavering whites to resist, too. The result was a climate hostile to reform that would alleviate racial injustice.



William F. Buckley



BARRY GOLDWATER

Goldwater campaign poster.

In the late 1960s some elements of the civil rights movement abandoned non-violence and became more separatist. Facing persistent inequality and spreading white resistance to addressing it after the mid-1960s, many African American activists continued to work through established national organizations such as the NAACP, while others turned to more radical politics. Black political culture had long sought both equity and self-determination, and coupled the fight against discrimination with internal institution-building. But as anger mounted at continuing injustice while black pride grew in the 1960s, [many young people, in particular, embraced the ideas of Black Power and revolutionary black nationalism.](#)

[Malcolm X](#) (1925-1965) attracted a growing following after he left the Nation of Islam in early 1964; his forthright [advocacy of self-defense](#) in the face of attack and his [identification with anti-colonial struggles](#) around the world galvanized poorer urban African Americans in particular. Enraged by continuing white violence, the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#) called for “[Black Power](#)” after mid-1966, led by [Stokely Carmichael](#) (1941-1998) after [James Meredith](#) was shot on the [March Against Fear](#). Most innovative was the Black Panther Party, founded in Oakland, California by Huey Newton (1942-1989) and Bobby Seale in 1966. Adapting ideas from socialists and the left-led national liberation struggles then animating Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the Panthers developed a trenchant analysis of urban poverty and white supremacy and, like, Malcolm X, sought to bring their “human rights” struggle to the world’s attention as they also engaged in community organizing and service projects and armed resistance to police brutality.



The cultural impact of the civil rights movement was not fully realized until after the 1960s. The quest for self-determination and communal development that followed the legislative victories of the mid-1960s sparked tremendous cultural and intellectual creativity. The [Black Arts](#) movement produced a renaissance in literature, [theater](#), [art](#), music and dance. Black history became one of the most dynamic fields of U.S. history, led by scholars such as John Hope Franklin (1915-2009). Self-fashioning changed as natural “Afro” hair styles came into vogue, along with African-derived dress styles such as the dashiki and Kente cloth. In countless cities around the country, community organizers set to work, often with initial funding from [Great Society](#) programs, to alleviate poverty, fight hopelessness, and generate the power and resources for community development.

Seen in the light of all this activity, the 2008 presidential election, which surprised so many in both the U.S. and the wider world, becomes more explicable. The ongoing, if usually unheralded, activism after the mid-1960s altered American institutions and culture profoundly, even if the outcomes fell far short of the egalitarian visions those who worked so hard to produce change. Their efforts to open and transform workplaces, schools, politics, and communities had, bit by bit, opened a pathway for Barack Obama to reach the pinnacle of power, even as it was his own prodigious talent that carried him up that path to the Oval Office. His candidacy stirred deep wells of black pride and aspiration and elicited unprecedented turnout from millions of hitherto discouraged first-time voters. At the same time, tens of millions of white Americans were by then yearning for the “change” and “hope” that candidate Obama promised. They, too, worried

about their and their children's prospects in the new low-wage service-based economy, struggled to get decent health care, and sought better relations between the U.S. and the wider world. The inauguration seemed a time of widely shared national elation. Yet, when the new President set to work to bring the promised change in the form of policies such as national health care reform, he met determined resistance from the conservative movement, which now dominated the Republican Party. Indeed, by 2010, the nation faced stormy clashes as the two streams of post-1968 civil rights history met in Washington: an accomplished and enduring civil rights struggle, now joined to a wider reinvigorated liberalism, and a potent conservative power base determined to fight any equalization of the nation's racial practices and economic policies.

Guiding Student Discussion

The post-1968 civil rights story is one of the most important—and therefore sometimes the most difficult—discussions to have with students. It involves core values and lived experience about which many adults, let alone teenagers, are not especially reflective. White students can get defensive, while black students sometimes assume they know more than they actually do about how we got to where we are. Abstract assertion on the instructor's part (like what I've just done, due to space limitations) is least likely to work well in conveying the issues. Fortunately, there are excellent materials easily available for experiential learning, the kind most likely to succeed and leave a lasting imprint. There are [powerful primary sources](#), for example, with which to bring these themes to life and enable students to engage in activities such as role play debates that build empathy and circumvent defensiveness. Films also work well. Try, for example, segments of the *Eyes on the Prize II* series; or *At the River I Stand*, about the Memphis strike; *An Unlikely Friendship*, about class, schooling, and community power; or *Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*, about Shirley Chisholm's race for the presidency.

Help students see that racism is not simply a matter of individual behavior or belief. The biggest challenge is to get beyond the notion that racism is simply an individual attitudinal or ethical failing. This notion is promoted by popular culture and official ideology alike, and a big barrier to understanding. Students cannot make sense of the post-1968 history if they remain stuck in this conceptual rut. So the trick is to find ways to get them thinking in social-structural and situational terms, without losing sight of human agency. Encountering a dramatic fight over northern segregation can help, such as [Dr. King's experience in Cicero, Illinois](#), or exploring the housing sub plot of Lorraine Hansberry's widely assigned *Raisin in the Sun*. The core conceptual task is to understand the difference between formal legal equality and substantive equal treatment. You can make a start on this by exposing the fiction that the racial divide of the North resulted from innocent *de facto*, as opposed to *de jure*, segregation. In fact, northern segregation was also created and sustained by Help students understand that racial inequality in both the North and the South was deliberately instigated and maintained. intentional policy, if in a less in-your-face manner than its southern sibling, as you can show with exercises to help students understand practices such as [real estate steering](#), bank red-lining of black communities, school boundary gerrymandering, and white flight from racially changing neighborhoods. Once students grasp the intentional agency that produced racial inequality, they can better appreciate why the civil rights movement saw race-conscious remedies as vital, among them metropolitan busing

and taxation plans, affirmative action in employment and education, and scatter-site public housing.

The achievements of the civil rights movement allowed differences among African Americans to be more freely expressed. As students reckon with the structural determinants of racial inequality, they will be better equipped to recognize the diversity *among* African Americans that has been such a driving feature of post-1968 history. Differences derived from class position, gender, [color](#), political orientation and more always existed, but the civil rights victories of the 1960s freed them to be expressed more openly than ever before. Since then, we've seen many kinds of public clashes: black radicals arguing against black liberals; black mayors opposing strikes of city workers; black feminists challenging male domination in movement organizations; black conservatives challenging black civil rights figures; black female employees charging black male supervisors with sexual harassment; and black lesbians and gays confronting black ministers who promote homophobia.

Help students understand that the "black community" is as diverse and complex as the "white community." All students need to appreciate such intra-group differences to make sense of their world. When they speak of blacks or whites in unitary terms (as presumably all sharing the experiences and views), challenge them with contrary cases from the more complex reality until it becomes second nature to specify who exactly they are talking about when they venture generalizations. At the same time, exercises that help to explain why it is that race remains the prime determinant in how Americans vote will help students balance diversity and change with how much "race [still] matters," in the apt phrase of Princeton philosopher [Cornell West](#).

Finally, to really "get" this history, students must also be guided to understand—not simply to judge—the whites who opposed the civil rights struggle and why some whites supported it. Here, too, primary sources are the way to develop the capacity for analytical empathy. Let them hear first-hand from segregationists such as the long-serving Mississippi U.S. [Senator James Eastland](#) (1904-1986) or Philadelphia's backlash mayor [Frank Rizzo](#) (1920-1991), and from white suburban homeowners who rallied to defend exclusionary zoning policies or defeat metropolitan school desegregation. Then introduce them to white civil rights movement allies like [Virginia Foster Durr](#) (1903-1999) and [Anne \(1924-2006\) and Carl \(1914-1975\) Braden](#) or the [Students for a Democratic Society](#), or assign them [President Lyndon Baines Johnson's \(1908-1973\) 1965 speeches on race](#), and push them to explain the divergence they find.



Kentucky civil rights activists
Anne and Carl Braden.

Scholars Debate

Because of the relative recency of these events, the books that first set the terms of debate were heavily influenced by media representations. Scholars took their cues from press coverage and from their own political inclinations, while few of the early cohort were African Americans themselves because blacks were still so poorly represented in research institutions. Accounts in this mode by Allen Matusow and Todd Gitlin established the conventional wisdom still found in most textbooks. They tell a tale of decline after the mid-1960s with Black Power—sometimes rendered as an “identity politics” break from “universalism”—featured as the culprit. It seems almost willful in its alleged destruction of a purported liberal coalition.

Over the last two decades especially, a rich literature has emerged that has undermined this interpretation among most scholars of this history, if not in the general public. First, the declension story misses the vast extent of ongoing activism after the late 1960s. It thus understates the great advances that came from [black nationalism](#), among them the explosion of black history and African American studies. But above all, the declension story misreads the sources and dynamics of radicalization because it all but ignores the ways in which New Deal policies and labor movement practices, which benefitted many blacks along with most whites, also entrenched racial inequality in America in ways that snowballed over the decades after the 1930s. Both historians and social scientists have together revealed what has come to be called America’s “two-track welfare state”: a bifurcated structure that from the outset disproportionately benefitted white men and disadvantaged most people of color and women of all backgrounds. Ostensibly neutral policies such as wage and hour laws and Social Security thus excluded agricultural workers and domestic servants, while Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance was unavailable in predominantly black or transitional neighborhoods. So-called “identity politics,” then, have their roots in these structures: prompted by the inequities they created, such organizing has aimed to promote, ultimately, a genuinely inclusive universalism.

One school of interpretation that synthesizes well these varied discoveries of recent scholarship is “the long civil rights movement” framework, summarized by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in a presidential address under that title to the Organization of American Historians. As the phrase suggests, this framework draws attention to the deep earlier roots of the struggles of the 1960s in the civil rights unionism and expansive black activism of the New Deal era and World War II, as it also carries the story up to the present, well beyond the mid-1960s closure of conventional wisdom. The long movement literature draws attention to how racial inequality was built into the workings of the U.S. labor market and social policy, and highlights enduring conservative resistance to social democracy and racial inclusion alike. Two historians, Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, have criticized the long civil rights movement framework, arguing that it understates rupture over time, the distinctiveness of the South, and the clashes among different streams of black politics. Yet at the time of this writing, growing numbers of scholars seem to be embracing and refining the long civil rights movement approach, because they find in it a strong conceptual handle for the complex story of an evolving and internally varied movement that stretches back at least until the late 1930s and far beyond the 1960s. Indeed, that framework,

better than any other, explains both the election of Barack Obama and the tough challenges he faced in governing a starkly polarized nation that had yet to take to heart Dr. King's admonition that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."