

Background of the Civil Rights Movement

For African Americans, the road to freedom and equality was long and difficult. The Thirteenth Amendment freed slaves. African Americans became citizens under the 14th Amendment. The 15th Amendment gave them the right to vote. All three amendments were ratified shortly after the Civil War. Still, Black Americans faced public discrimination and openly unfair treatment through most of the 20th century. Prior to the Civil War, slaves were seen as property. Slave codes made slaves behave as if they were lower than Whites. For a short time after the Civil War, Radical Republicans, who favored giving African Americans more rights, controlled Congress. Union troops in southern states protected those rights. African Americans enjoyed some freedoms and many voted. Some even held political office.

But in time, Union troops left the South. Different lawmakers were elected. African Americans were again treated as second-class citizens. Black codes were passed. They took the place of the old slave codes. The right to vote was taken away from them. Many years of violence and unfairness followed. African Americans struggled for civil rights even as those rights were being taken away. However, racism and tradition worked against them. Some White Americans were not aware of how bad things were for Blacks. As a result, discrimination, segregation, and unpunished violence toward Black Americans continued for many years. The court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 showed that even a racist Supreme Court approved of segregation. Segregation was a policy that separated the races. Blacks could not go to school with Whites. They could not swim in public pools with Whites. They had separate drinking fountains and restrooms. They were treated as second-class citizens.

African Americans fought for civil rights. They saw some success. In 1910, W.E. B. DuBois and others started the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They

wanted to improve the sad conditions many Blacks faced. Thousands moved from the South to northern cities where life was better. In the 1920s, jazz musicians and Harlem Renaissance writers praised African American culture. They made African American music, art, poetry, and books more popular. Some White people felt sympathy toward African Americans. Other Whites opposed them even more.

In 1942, James Farmer Jr. and others started the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). His group fought to end segregation. Six years later, President Truman ended racial segregation in the military. Civil rights leaders won a major victory when the Supreme Court ruled against the segregation of schools in 1954. Still, change was slow. Few southern states obeyed the court's ruling. Segregated neighborhoods in the North led to the segregation of schools there, too. In spite of small successes like the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955, African Americans still faced big challenges.

Some civil rights laws were passed before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1957, Congress passed a law that protected Blacks' right to vote. However, lawmakers who opposed the bill changed it so that it was hard to enforce. It did not do what reformers had hoped. In 1960, another Civil Rights Act was passed. It was meant to fix the problems with the earlier law. President Eisenhower insisted that schools integrate. He ordered that violence against African Americans be investigated. He demanded that job policies for firms with government contracts be fair. Though better than the 1957 law, the Civil Rights Act of 1960 still disappointed civil rights leaders.

In 1963, most civil rights reformers saw five big problems that minorities faced. First, many Blacks were still denied the right to vote. Second, Jim Crow laws still segregated the South. Laws kept Blacks from restaurants, hotels, swimming pools, and theaters enjoyed by Whites.

Third, many schools were still segregated in spite of the Supreme Court's ruling against that. Fourth, Blacks were treated unfairly at work. Many were unemployed. Fifth, Blacks lived in poverty at much higher rates than Whites. Leaders of the civil rights movement hoped that President Kennedy would support a civil rights bill that fixed these five problems.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

In November 1960, Kennedy was elected president. He promised to support civil rights. But after his election, civil rights became a lower priority for him. He did not do much to support civil rights for his first 2 years in office. He faced some challenges that made it hard for him to act. His Democratic Party was split. The liberal northern Democrats favored civil rights. But the southern Democrats energetically opposed civil rights. The Republican Party was also made up of people who supported some civil right reforms and people who opposed laws that affected businesses or state policies. If Kennedy were to propose a civil rights law, he would anger southern Democrats. Then they might block his other plans. If Kennedy did nothing, he would upset the liberal northern Democrats. The Republicans might take the lead and pass a weaker civil rights law.

Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders were upset by the delay. They held a rally in Birmingham, Alabama, to protest Jim Crow laws there. The police attacked protesters, causing international outrage. Kennedy felt like he should use federal troops to keep the peace. He was afraid that violence might happen across the South and in northern cities. Kennedy formed a team of advisors who wrote a civil rights plan that he shared with Americans in a speech on TV on June 11, 1963. Over the next weeks, Kennedy met with civil rights leaders. He and his advisors proposed a civil rights bill that would end segregated schools and discrimination

in public places. It would also address voting concerns. But it did nothing to solve black poverty. Civil rights leaders were disappointed.

The bill went through many drafts. A subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee strengthened the bill. Civil rights leaders praised the changes. Conservative Republicans and southern Democrats swore they would oppose it. After Kennedy's assassination, a "compromise bill," like Kennedy's original, passed through the House of Representatives and was sent to the Senate. Southern Democrats in the Senate organized a record-setting filibuster (a long speech made by many people) to slow down the bill. These tactics had weakened the earlier civil rights acts. The Senate had been unable to vote for cloture until the earlier bills had been weakened. Cloture meant ending the debate and voting on the bill. It required two-thirds of the Senate. Many people who did not like the new bill worried about Title II, which outlawed discrimination in public places. They also opposed Title VII, which outlawed discrimination in jobs. They thought that business owners should be free to choose whether or not to discriminate. From March until June, a filibuster continued. Finally, on June 10, 1964, a changed bill had enough support that the vote for cloture passed. On July 2, the House approved the Senate's amended bill. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law later that evening.