

Civil rights movement essay sample

[Law](#), [Court](#)



What were the aims and methods of the Civil Rights Movement and how successful were they in achieving their aims by 1964? The civil rights movement was a political, legal and social struggle by Black Americans to gain full citizenship rights and to achieve racial equality. After the eminent speech by Martin Luther King (in the early 1950's) African American men and women, along with the whites, organised and led the movement at national and local levels. They organised events such as non-violent protests, bus boycotting and sit-ins. The Civil Rights movement was based in the South of America, where the African-American population was concentrated and where racial inequality was most obvious. The first significant development of the Civil Rights Movement came almost immediately at the turn of the decade, when the Supreme Court essentially overturned the verdict reached in the Plessy vs. Ferguson trial of 1896. The aim of this case was to declare the racial segregation under state laws as unconstitutional.

Due to the NAACP lawyers, the Supreme Court made three decisions regarding civil rights which not only showed that at times the government was on the blacks side, but also almost completely overturned the 'separate but equal' idea that had been followed for 54 years. Slowly the movement was achieving its aims. However, the court verdict was that segregated education was unconstitutional, and by 1955 all states were ordered to integrate schools, though most states ignored the ruling. As a result, lynching and racial attacks increased in the South. The thought was that if it was applied to schools it would then be applied elsewhere to buses, restaurants etc. Therefore the movements aims were hindered by the inflexibility of the states to adopt the new ruling, it took 11 years for the

ruling to be applied. It was a ground mark ruling but with limitations. Up until 1955, many of the Northern, white Americans were unaware of the extent of the racism in the ‘ Southern States’, one instance in 1955 changed that greatly.

The death of Emmet Till became a vital incident in the civil rights movement due to the horrific pictures of the young boy that circulated throughout America. Emmett Louis was an African-American teenager who was murdered in Mississippi at the age of 14 after reportedly flirting with a white woman. It is thought that up to 50, 000 people viewed the body of Emmet Till, as it appeared in a number of newspapers and magazines, this greatly increased awareness of racism in the South and gave the civil rights movement many more white supporters from the North. Legal strategies contributed greatly to the amount of success that the Civil Rights movement achieved. This was for several reasons, one of the main ones being that they provided integration in specific areas of life, for example, education and transportation. This meant that, for the first time in modern American history, black Americans were protected from racism and segregation by the law. This was seen in the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) ruling and the subsequent Little Rock incident in Alabama, 1957.

This was significant because the students attempting to exercise their newly awarded rights were, when confronted with the resistance led by the Governor, supported by the President and the Supreme Court Topeka decision he represented. Consequently, the resistance caved in and the students were able to go to Little Rock High School. This proved that black

students were now able to attend the same schools as whites, something that would not have been possible prior to 1950's. Therefore, it is evident that the legal strategies were able to provide integration in regards to education. This was also seen in other areas, such as transportation. As a result of the *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) case, the segregation of seating on buses was outlawed. This allowed black Americans to keep their seats, something, which again, would not have happened prior 1950 and without legal strategies.

This meant that legal cases and strategies led to successes in many areas, such as education and transportation and ultimately contributed to the overall success of the Black American Civil Rights Movement. The Little Rock Nine were nine students who were 'allowed' to attend a 'white school' in Little Rock, Arkansas, due to the verdict of *Brown vs. Topeka*. However the students were blocked from entering the school by the Arkansas National Guard, under orders by Governor Faubus. However President Eisenhower intervened in a civil rights event for the first time in his presidency, contradicting his usual uncommitted approach, and sent the US Army to escort and protect the nine students. This instance showed that even though some Supreme Court rulings opposed public opinion, they were still law and were there to be enforced, however it was the instance in which the black community realised that they couldn't rely solely on court decisions and would need to fight for their rights. However, although there was so much success and triumph in the civil rights movement in the 1950s, there were still setbacks and problems that arose.

Although Brown vs. Topeka was a big success for civil rights, the decision was by right and not in fact, meaning that although the ruling had been made there was very little public response to it, especially in the south. Also the Supreme Court had failed to put a date on the decision meaning that there was no real haste to desegregate schools, in Brown II the Supreme Court declared that desegregation should occur 'with all deliberate speed', but the events at Little Rock in 1957 proved that the whites were still persisting in segregation. Also, although Little Rock was seen as a success, as the President was behind the blacks, after the incident was over, Governor Faubus closed all schools in Little Rock until 1959 as he would prefer there to be no schools than desegregated schools. This shows that there was always a way for the whites to get around desegregation without much attention being paid to it. Another great success of the Civil Rights Movement was the emergence of Martin Luther King; he became a prominent figure in black rights in the '50s and had some of his first struggles and 1956-1965 are said to be the 'Martin Luther King years'.

King's oratory was becoming famed and he slowly began to gain the respect and trust of the black population throughout the 1950s. The event where King was really tested for the first time was the Montgomery Bus Boycott, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man and was imprisoned; this started a yearlong boycott of the busses in Montgomery, Alabama. King showed great charisma through these times, raising morale and making sure that the boycott persisted. The boycott resulted in desegregation on public transport in Montgomery and showed that King was an admirable leader; he had been tested and had passed. The Montgomery

Bus Boycott is often seen as ‘ the start of the civil rights movement’. Non-violent direct action provided an avenue for success in black American’s struggle to achieve equality in terms of civil rights. This was because non-violent direct action had a twofold effect: it pressured organisations to reduce or completely abolish their level of segregation and it gained support from people, especially those who were undecided on the issue of civil rights.

The pressure that non-violent protests put upon companies and organisations can be very easily seen during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. During this protest, the bus businesses lost 75% of their market. Subsequently they lost a 75% loss in profits, something that the companies could not tolerate without going bankrupt or at least being very financially shaken. This suggests that non-violent direct protesting helped secure success in the civil rights movement. Non-violent protesting attracted good media attention, which portrayed how unjust and unfair the whites treated the blacks. This made some of the whites think twice about their actions and their behaviour towards the blacks. A protest that contributed to the mass movement was the sit-ins. The basic plan of the sit-ins was that a group of students would go to a lunch counter and ask to be served. If they were, they’d move on to the next lunch counter. The first sit-in, undertaken by just four students from a technical college in Greensboro, N. C., opened a new phase of mass action in the civil rights movement.

The simple act of sitting down at the whites-only lunch counter, Blacks were required to stand and eat, set an example for young people all over the country who were looking for a way to challenge Jim Crow segregation.

Within a single year, some 50, 000 people had participated in one or more sit-ins. By fall 1960, there were signs that the southern civil rights movement had been profoundly transformed by the fiercely independent student protest movement. Those who had participated in the sit-in campaign were determined to continue the direct action tactics that were seizing the initiative from more cautious organizations made up of older people, such as King's SCLC. The Freedom rides that occurred in 1961 were only partly successful. In 1946, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional. However its ruling only works if the people of America and the governments at state and local level agree to support such a ruling. The 1946 ruling by the Supreme Court was not accepted by the South.

The Freedom Riders did not make it to New Orleans therefore their aim was not entirely met, however they had made their point and received a great deal of publicity. They had also got the Attorney-General involved. In September 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission introduced a ruling that was much tighter and less open to interpretation than the Supreme Court ruling of 1946. This ruling, concerning the integration of interstate transport, came in to force in November 1961, thus achieving the movements aim. There were many factors which were unhelpful to the Civil Rights cause, one of them being the usage of violent protesting. This provided critics of desegregation reason to say that black Americans were undeserving of full citizenship for, in the words of Joe Palmer, an citizen of Los Angeles, “ they shouldn't get rights when they behave like that”. Violent

protesting also led to some white Americans becoming intimidated by black Americans that resulted in a loss of support for the movement.

Therefore, violent protesting provided critics with a reason to say they were undeserving of equality and resulted in scaring away support from white communities. In conclusion, because Black Americans resorted to violence, which intimidated some white citizens and gave reason for critics to claim they were not worthy of full civil rights, they were unable to achieve equal civil rights. Therefore because they did not fully achieve their goals of complete equality, it cannot be said they had complete success. However, these setbacks and discrepancies don't balance out the great number of successes and advancements made in the civil rights movement. Through legal action and non-violent direct action, they were able to introduce laws that banned segregation; pressure companies to comply with these new laws and gain crucial public support. It is because of these successes that overall, the movement was, at the very least, partly successful.