Part A Carry out a historical enquiry

A1 The civil rights movement 1945–62

Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

- explain some of the forces driving change and resisting change for civil rights
- explain the development of methods of protest in the civil rights movement
- explain why some methods of protest worked better than others.

The movement and change

The **civil rights** movement in the USA aimed to end discrimination against black Americans. Civil rights are the rights that citizens of a country have by law. All American citizens had equal rights according to the law: regardless of whether they were black or white. But in many states of the USA, black people were not allowed this equality. Here there was massive opposition to black people having the same rights as white people.

The civil rights movement was a long and difficult struggle against this opposition. The story of the civil rights movement has many twists and turns as those involved in it tried different ways to get the rights they had by law.

Civil rights: the rights that citizens of a country have by law.

'Engines of change' and roadblocks

Changes take place in history for a range of different reasons. The driving forces behind these changes are sometimes called 'engines of change'. They are the things which cause changes to occur. They are like the engine of a bus, driving groups of people along a road. Then there are things that oppose this change: maybe stopping it or making it take a different route. We can think of these as being like roadblocks for our bus of change.

There were several different forces causing changes and blocking changes in the civil rights movement. Three of the most important are (a) government action (b) social forces and (c) organisations and individuals.

Government action

The USA has two different levels of government. There is a **federal** government which sets laws for all the states of the United States together. Then each state has its own government and its own laws.

At the start of our period 1945–62, officially, everyone born in the USA was a US citizen and all citizens had the right to vote. But the real situation was quite different. Some states had legal **segregation**. The argument of these so-called 'Jim Crow' laws was that black and white citizens could both have the same rights, but to separate things. Both could have the same right to educate their children, for example, but not in the same schools.

Federal: the United States is a collection of different states all bound together into a federation, with a federal government and federal laws.

Segregation: keeping separate.

NAACP: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It began in 1909.

Ku Klux Klan: a racist white group.

Social forces

Many different social changes had an impact on the civil rights movement. The Second World War, at the start of the period you are studying, is a great example. The USA played a major part in defeating the forces of racism and persecution. Over 1.2 million black men joined up to fight the Nazis, fighting for freedoms that they did not have themselves. Many were determined to continue the fight when they got home.

Source A: A former corporal from Alabama explains how the war has affected him.

> I spent four years in the army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen and I'm hanged if I'm going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home.

But as well as social changes that pushed the movement forward, there were social attitudes that stood in its way. Racism was very deeply ingrained in much of America, not just in the South. Many white people could not begin to imagine their black neighbours as being equals. They believed black people were naturally inferior – not to be trusted with responsibility or authority. Perhaps behind much racism was also fear – what would life be like for white people if black people were in charge?

Organisations and individuals

Organisations like the **NAACP** campaigned against segregation. When successful, these campaigns could take the movement closer to its goals. But organisations like the **Ku Klux Klan** had enormous influence too: focusing white people's racist attitudes and fears and using violence and murder to intimidate black people. Individuals also had an impact on the history of the civil rights movement – both in inspiring protest and in blocking change.

Activities

1. As you work through this chapter, complete a chart like the one started here that identifies things that drove change and things that blocked it or slowed it down. One example has been added to get you started.

Factor	How it drove change or blocked change
Second World War	Black Americans fought for freedom in Europe and Asia and were determined to fight for it at home as well.

2. Think about ways in which you would fight for your rights as a citizen. What rights would you fight for and how would you fight for them?
3. Research the Ku Klux Klan to find out how they acted to block the civil rights movement. Use reliable textbooks rather than web research to get started.

Segregation and voting rights

Two main ways in which black Americans were denied their civil rights were segregation and not being allowed to vote.

Segregation was based on the idea that black people and white people could have separate access to services: so as we saw on page 4, each could have access to education, just not the same schools. As long as the services were equally good, no one's civil rights would suffer. The problem with this, though, was that the services were not equally good. Black schools, for example, were given very little money compared to white schools. White children were therefore much better educated. Black Americans were not being treated equally: in fact they were being treated unfairly in almost every way imaginable.

Voting rights were rigged too. All US citizens had the right to vote, according to federal law. But local laws in some states put up obstacles to stop black people voting. For example, some states required voters to be able to show that their grandfather had been allowed to vote too: not likely if your grandfather had been black. Or voters had to complete a literacy test, with black voters being given much harder tests or simply being told they had failed. And then there was the threat of violence against black people who tried to vote.

Living in a segregated society was deeply unfair. Being prevented from voting meant black people had no chance of influencing politicians to get rid of segregation.

Follow up your enquiry

Research the different ways in which segregation affected black people's lives in the 1950s and 1960s. You could focus on two or three of these areas:

- education
- transportation
- leisure activities
- employment
- housing.

Activities

4. Write a diary entry, imagining you are a black teenager living in a segregated town. Describe how you feel about the way you live, and what you would like to do that you can't.
5. Why do you think black people stayed in the segregated states? Why not just move to other states?

Using the law

The USA is a democracy where all people are supposed to have equal rights in law. This meant the civil rights movement could use the legal system to protest against inequality and segregation.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka

Because there were so many cases where segregation meant federal law about equal rights was being broken, one protest route was to take these cases to court. The NAACP (see page 5) used lawyers to keep pressing rulings against segregation. Often the lawyers were volunteers who wanted to aid the civil rights movement. But the process was a long and difficult one. It was not until 1954 that the NAACP managed to take a case through all the stages to obtain a victory that applied to all public (state) schools in the USA: *Brown v. Topeka*.

Oliver Brown was a black parent who objected to the fact that his eight-year-old daughter, Linda, was denied entry to a nearby all-white school. Instead she had to travel to an all-black school over a mile away. This case was supported by several other examples from across the country.

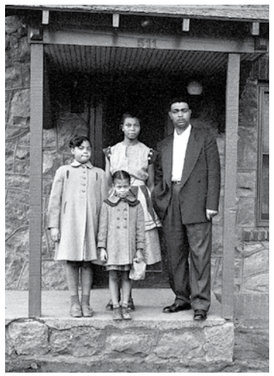
The leading lawyer for the NAACP was Thurgood Marshall. He argued that black children had the same abilities as white children but were hampered by segregated schools. He used expert witnesses and social science research to support his arguments.

ResultsPlus

Top Tip

In your study of protests, don't assume that a change in the law did actually change people's lives. Think about the factors which could hold up change.

Source B: The Brown family, Topeka, Kansas, 1954. Linda is on the left.



In order to win the case, Marshall needed to convince a majority of the nine Supreme Court judges. It looked as if Marshall might fail, not least because of the reluctant attitude of Chief Justice Vinson. The case was due to be re-argued for the final time when Vinson died. The new Chief Justice was Earl Warren, who surprised almost everyone – including President Dwight Eisenhower, who had appointed him – by giving wholehearted support to desegregation (see page 28).

Source C: Chief Justice Warren delivers the unanimous Supreme Court ruling on the *Brown* case, 17 May 1954.

> Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race… deprive the children...of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. To separate...solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority...unlikely ever to be undone... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

A major block – Southern resistance

The *Brown* verdict was a milestone for civil rights: it showed that the legal route could get results. On the other hand, there was a big difference between winning a legal case and changing the situation in practice. Some states cooperated, such as Missouri and Kentucky: so-called 'border' states between the South and the North.

In the **Deep South**, though, there was much greater hostility and resistance. White Citizens' Councils were set up to defend the practice of segregation. Senator Harry Byrd called for 'massive resistance', and 101 congressmen signed a 'Southern Manifesto' expressing their resentment at federal government's meddling with their state law and their determination to resist desegregation.

Opposition to desegregation and to **integration** was highly effective in the South. Rules were twisted to ensure that black students were not allowed into white schools. Laws to make sure all children went to school were suspended. This was a way of making sure that black children didn't go to school. Teachers of mixed classes had their teaching licences taken away. Sometimes financial aid was removed from integrated schools or grants were given to white children to attend private white-only schools. If all else failed to prevent integration, schools were closed.

Deep South: the states at the Southern edge of the USA: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina in particular. These states had been highly dependent on black slave labour for their plantation agriculture before the Civil War (1861–1865).

Integration: the opposite of segregation; also meaning black Americans having the same opportunities as white Americans, not just the right to access the same services.

Activities

6. What do you think was most important in getting the *Brown v. Topeka* victory:
   - the role of a key individual(s)?
   - the organisation of the NAACP?
   - right timing/it had to happen eventually?
   - something else?

   Give reasons for your answers.
7. Compare the methods used to oppose desegregation. Which kinds (if any) were:
   - legal protests?
   - semi-legal?
   - illegal?

Case study: the law and Little Rock

States in the Deep South, such as Georgia and Mississippi, made it clear that integration would be strongly opposed. The situation was slightly different in Arkansas. Race relations in the capital, Little Rock, were relatively good. It was a small community of just over 100,000 people, and about a quarter of the population was black. Although some facilities were segregated, such as hotels, theatres, restaurants and toilets, there had been significant desegregation, for example for libraries, parks, buses and hospitals. Arkansas was therefore willing to comply with the *Brown* decision, at least in a token fashion.

Rigging the system

The plan for integration in Little Rock was designed to avoid controversy. Two new schools were built: one in the white side of town and one in the black side. But a third school, the all-white Central High School, posed a problem. Integration would have to be permitted because black middle-class parents were bound to want their children to go there.

The authorities rigged the system to make it unlikely that black students would get in. Students had to meet rigged standards like 'character' and 'health' to get in. These criteria whittled down the black applicants from 75 to 25 children. Then the authorities did all they could to convince the remaining families not to continue with their application.

Source D: Elizabeth Eckford leaves Central High School, Little Rock, having been turned away, on 4 September 1957.

The Little Rock Nine

Only nine students were brave enough to continue to try to attend the school. They became famous as the 'Little Rock Nine' and one of their number, Elizabeth Eckford, became a symbol for the civil rights movement.

Source E: Elizabeth Eckford's recollection of the events of 4 September 1957.

> I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in ...When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards moved in and raised their bayonets …I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me …Somebody started yelling, 'Lynch her! Lynch her!' I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob … I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me. They came closer, shouting, 'No nigger bitch is going to get in our school'.

Eckford managed to escape because she was helped by two white people, a *New York Times* reporter and a member of the local NAACP.

Opposition from Governor Faubus

The guards who prevented the 'Little Rock Nine' from entering Central High were acting on the orders of Orval Faubus, the governor of Arkansas. In times of emergency the governor had the authority to call out the National Guard – local volunteers who had received military training. Faubus had been spreading rumours that black troublemakers were buying weapons. He appeared on local television, predicting blood on the streets if integration continued. By trying to stop educational integration Faubus was hoping to gain popularity with white voters – at almost any cost.

Repeated rulings by the Federal District Court forced Faubus to remove the National Guard, but he simply replaced them with police whom he then encouraged to turn a blind eye to threats and violence from white protestors.

When the school reopened on 23 September, the 'Little Rock Nine' did get in, but only after the police rescued them from enraged protestors.

The media and President Eisenhower

Public opinion in America and the wider world was influenced by reports about Little Rock using onsite TV cameras. This was a relatively new development in the media. Some of the most shocking reports included interviews with innocent-looking white girls, who expressed violently racist views. President Eisenhower realised how damaging the crisis was becoming and therefore appeared on national television, announcing his decision to use federal troops to restore order. He sent 1,000 paratroopers and placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal control.

Source F: President Eisenhower's televised address, 24 September 1957.

> Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts… At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done… Our enemies are gloating over this incident…We are portrayed as a violator of those standards…which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations.

Success at Central High?

Despite the president finally giving strong support to integration at Central High, it would be mistaken to regard Little Rock as a clear-cut victory for civil rights. Although the black students were eventually allowed into Central High, their daily experiences were very unpleasant: they were repeatedly victimised and abused, even while the federal troops were present. The situation worsened after November 1957, when the National Guard took over once more.

Only one black student, Ernest Green, succeeded in graduating before Governor Faubus closed all public schools in Little Rock in 1958. Only three black students dared to enrol when Central High reopened the following year, and by 1964 just 123 out of about 7,000 black students attended desegregated schools in Little Rock. Widespread integration did not take place until the 1970s. The crisis at Little Rock in 1957 therefore revealed the scale of the problems that the civil rights movement needed to overcome.

Source G: This is a photo of a rally held in Little Rock against Central High's integration (January 1959).

Activities

8. Would you use Little Rock as a case study to show:
   - a big step forward for the civil rights movement?
   - an example of the difficulties the movement faced?
   - an example of the successful use of the law?
   - an example of the tension between federal and state government?

   Give reasons for and against each option.
9. What do you think motivated each of these key individuals at Little Rock:
   - President Eisenhower?
   - Governor Faubus?
   - Elizabeth Eckford?
10. Study Source G. Why were these people so strongly against black children going to Central High?
11. Explain why the media could be useful to the civil rights movement.
12. Was Little Rock more of a failure than a success for civil rights? Draw up two lists headed Success and Failure to help you answer this question.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott – a turning point?

Limitations of the legal route

Using the law as a lever for change produced results with *Brown v. Topeka*, although Little Rock showed the limitations of the legal route:

- where state government and the white population were strongly against integration, it was almost impossible to make changes through the courts alone
- federal government gave only weak support for integration because of fears that white voters would turn against the president.

Changing the law was not forcing actual changes in black people's lives. To be effective, other forms of protest were needed too. One of the most effective was the boycott.

Did you know?

We use two Latin terms to describe situations where what the law says doesn't match what is actually happening:

de jure describes the position according to the law

de facto describes what was actually happening in practice.

Boycotts and economic protests

A boycott is when a large group of people refuses to do something, in order to protest. It works best in economic situations: especially when the regular customers of a service stop using that service. You can see that a boycott wouldn't work very well with a school – people didn't want the black children turning up anyway. But the bus boycott of 1955–56 in Montgomery, Alabama, was a different scenario, as we shall now see.

Rosa Parks refuses to move

The rules for segregation on Montgomery buses were a longstanding cause of complaint. The rear seats were for black people only, and the ones towards the front were reserved for white people. There was a middle-zone in which black people might sit, providing no white person was sitting in this row. On 1 December 1955 a woman called Rosa Parks was told to stand because a white passenger wanted one seat in this row. She refused to move and was arrested.

Boycott

In response to her arrest, an organisation – the Montgomery Improvement Association – was set up and a preacher, Martin Luther King, agreed to lead it. The first tactic was a one-day boycott of all Montgomery buses for these demands:

- bus drivers to treat black passengers courteously
- seating to be on a first-come, first-served basis (with black passengers filling the bus from the rear and white passengers from the front)
- black bus drivers for black routes.

These moderate demands met with an extreme response. Black people who joined the boycott were threatened with losing their jobs and sometimes by direct violence. The leaders of the boycott were arrested in an attempt to intimidate them. The effect was simply to increase the determination of the protestors. Complete desegregation became their objective and the boycott was maintained for 381 days.

Legal success

Alongside the boycott, the NAACP also took the case to court and gained this ruling:

Source H: The verdict of the Alabama Middle District Court in *Browder v. Gayle*, November 1956.

> The enforced segregation of Negro and white passengers on motor buses operating in the city of Montgomery violates the Constitution and laws of the United States…denies and deprives plaintiffs and other Negro citizens…of the equal protection of the laws and due process of law.

Montgomery's mayor appealed against this decision, but it was upheld by Chief Justice Warren in the Supreme Court. Black and white passengers could ride together on the buses of Montgomery without segregation.

Roadblock blasted?

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a turning point in the civil rights movement. Black protestors saw that by acting together they had significant economic power.

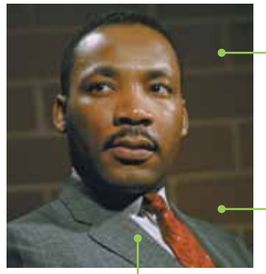
During the boycott, the bus company's revenue went down by 65%. Local businesses lost custom. It was estimated that the boycott caused losses of about $1 million. Therefore white businessmen became anxious to resolve the dispute.

Success was also due to solidarity in the black community. People walked together, or shared cars and taxis, to get to work (organisers arranged low taxi rates and car-share pick-up points). They resisted intimidation and tried to avoid violence. Crucially, there wasn't a way of rigging the system: the bus companies needed black passengers.

There were also another two key reasons why the boycott was successful. One was the leadership of Martin Luther King. The other was the way the NAACP organised the protest around the figure of Rosa Parks.

Martin Luther King – ideal leadership?

Martin Luther King



- King's eloquence and bravery inspired many black people.
- King was an ideal figure for media attention: photogenic, expressed his views skilfully.
- His Christian values and commitment to non-violence meant he wasn't seen as a threat by many white Americans.

Activities

13. Compare the Montgomery Bus Boycott with the Little Rock Nine. What factors made Montgomery more successful?
14. When might a boycott be a bad choice of protest (for example, would it have worked against expensive whites-only sports clubs?)

Rosa Parks – the ideal figurehead?

The arrest of Rosa Parks on 1 December 1955 for challenging segregated transport is one of the most famous incidents in the civil rights movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott is sometimes misleadingly portrayed as a spontaneous protest in support of a woman who had been too tired to surrender her seat after an exhausting day's work. In fact:

Rosa Parks

- Rosa Parks had been involved with the NAACP since the early 1940s.
- Parks had been involved in several civil rights protests over the years.
- She had clashed with this particular bus driver before and had sworn never to ride his bus again.
- This wasn't the first bus boycott: there had been one in Louisiana in 1953, which the NAACP used as a template for Montgomery.
- The NAACP had nearly organised its boycott after Claudette Colvin, aged 15, was arrested for not moving when told to. But Colvin later became pregnant whilst not married and so was not considered 'reputable'.
- Parks was, on the other hand, perfect for the media: she was very respectable, a Christian and a valued member of the community.

None of this is to take away from Rosa Parks' bravery and her achievement, but it is important to see that in choosing to go with her, the NAACP was thinking of media publicity as being as crucial for the success of the protest as the economic impact was. The events of 1 December 1954 provided an ideal opportunity for action.

Building on the boycott

The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott gave the civil rights movement a major boost. In some ways the boycott marks the point where the movement really got going. It could make a real impact as long as its targets were well chosen and the protestors stayed strong against the opposition. The leadership of the protests was very important too. So it set out a blueprint for future protests – but could they be as successful?

Training protestors

The Bus Boycott established King as one of the most important leaders of the civil rights movement. He set up his own organisation in 1957: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (**SCLC**). This started to train people in effective non-violent protest. Citizenship Schools were designed to teach black citizens how to pass the voter registration tests (see page 6) as well as teaching about civil rights, democracy and non-violent protest.

This training programme was deeply unpopular with white opposition and schools were closed down and teachers had their licences taken away. But the schools started up again elsewhere, using volunteer teachers.

There was also opposition, however, from within the black community. King wanted black churches to join with the SCLC to give it support and get church members educated. But many churches believed King was pushing the movement away from the legal route, the safest and most acceptable form of protest – even if it was the slowest.

At the same time, King was also criticised by other black activists for not going far or fast enough.

SCLC: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It began in 1957.

SNCC: the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. It began in 1960.

CORE: the Congress of Racial Equality. It began in 1942.

Sit-in: a non-violent type of protest in which protestors sit down in an area and refuse to move.

Student power and sit-ins

After the success of Montgomery, large numbers of students, both black and white, joined in the civil rights protests. They wanted change to happen fast. A new organisation was created: the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (**SNCC**). This youth movement was inspired by experienced activists from the Congress of Racial Equality (**CORE**), such as James Farmer. The SNCC organised a new kind of non-violent economic protest: **sit-ins**.

On 1 February 1960 four students seated themselves at the 'white-only' section of the lunch counter of the downtown branch of Woolworths in Greensboro, North Carolina. They were not expecting to be served but refused to move to the 'colored' section. They sat in the 'white' section until closing time, and returned the following day with 23 other students, who continued the sit-in. By the end of the third day over 80 students were involved.

Similar protests spread into other Southern states. By April around 2,000 protestors had been arrested.

In order to make even greater impact the protestors adopted the tactic of 'Jail not bail' (bail is a pledge of money made to ensure someone accused of a crime turns up to their trial). If protestors refused bail, the court would have to keep them in jail until their trial. The protestors wanted to overwhelm the jails and make the system unworkable.

The sit-in movement affected over 200 cities in 20 states, scoring some spectacular successes. Woolworths lost 20% of its business and agreed to desegregate its lunch counters. By 1961 more than 120 Southern communities had some desegregated eating facilities. The success led to 'wade-ins' at segregated swimming pools, and 'kneel-ins' at segregated churches.

Activities

15. What are the similarities between sit-ins and the bus boycotts?

16. Why didn't protestors use sit-ins against the many restaurants that refused to serve black customers at all? (Hint: Woolworths had a lot of black customers.)

Freedom Riders – a direct challenge

At the same time, CORE planned an ambitious challenge to segregation. Black and white protestors, known as '**Freedom Riders**', bought tickets in a non-segregated state and travelled into the danger zones of the South, refusing to obey segregation laws. A recent Supreme Court ruling had confirmed that segregation was illegal on interstate transport. But CORE knew that this protest method would guarantee an extreme reaction in the Deep South. They wanted to provoke this reaction, and they wanted the TV cameras to film it.

Source I: Recollections by the CORE leader, James Farmer.

> We planned the Freedom Ride with the intention of creating a crisis. We were counting on the racists of the South to do our work for us. We figured the government would have to respond if we created a situation that was headline news all over the world.

Freedom Riders: a federal law meant interstate buses should not be segregated. Civil rights protestors, known as 'Freedom Riders' rode on these buses into segregated states to show that the law was often not being obeyed.

The tactic worked. In Anniston, the police allowed the local Ku Klux Klan to firebomb a bus (see Source J). In Birmingham, the police chief gave his officers the day off, allowing racist mobs a free hand. In Montgomery, Freedom Riders were beaten with baseball bats while the police refused to intervene.

Source J: Freedom Riders watch as the bus they were travelling in goes up in flames after being bombed in Anniston, 14 May 1961.

The president and progress

The new president in January 1961, John F. Kennedy, had to decide how far to use federal forces to prevent further violence. The president had no choice but to force through the desegregation of interstate travel. Segregation signs were removed and instead all interstate travel companies had to display signs stating that seating was provided 'without regard to race, colour, creed, or national origin'.

Activity

17. Look back over the chart you have completed for this chapter (Activity 1 on page 5).

- Which were the most important factors driving the civil rights movement?
- Which were the biggest obstacles to the movement gaining ground?

Your conclusion so far

From this topic, we have seen:

- NAACP success in the Brown case showed that the law could back integration.
- Effective forms of protest developed with strong leadership, organisation and support.
- The strong backlash from Southern whites seriously limited progress.
- The president had a key role in securing progress in civil rights.

From what you have learned in this topic, to what extent do you think non-violent protest, the media and the government were all interconnected?

To answer this question, consider:

- would non-violent protest have worked without the media?
- would the president have acted differently if the media had reported violent protest?
- how would the media have reacted to black people using violent protest?