

The Journey for Civil Rights

(1) The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments outlawed slavery, provided for equal protection under the law, guaranteed citizenship, and protected the right to vote for African Americans. The amendments also outlined that Congress could pass appropriate, specific legislation to enforce the rights outlined in the amendments.

(2) Many of the laws to protect these rights were left up to the states to carry out. This led to individual states controlling the treatment of African Americans and some southern states found ways to abuse the civil rights of minorities. African American groups grew more and more vocal and persuasive in their demands for equal treatment and rights throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and many white Americans began to also see the need for civil rights laws.

(3) During the 1950s, African Americans began to protest their treatment more publicly and actively as they demanded overall protection of their civil rights. African American protesters pointed to a number of social inequalities from which they suffered. Segregation, or separation based on race, prevented them from using a variety of public facilities on an equal basis with whites. African Americans were restricted in their use of public city buses, park facilities, and restrooms. Educational opportunities were also limited by the practice of separating African Americans and whites and providing African Americans with inferior instructional equipment. Finally, employment practices throughout the South and in many northern cities restricted African Americans' ability to advance economically.

(4) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was landmark legislation that attempted to improve the quality of life for African Americans and minority groups in the United States. The Act prohibited discrimination, or unfair treatment, of all kinds based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The act outlawed segregation in businesses, theaters, restaurants, and hotels. It banned discriminatory practices in employment and ended segregation in swimming pools, libraries, public schools, and other public places. The law also provided the federal government with the powers to enforce desegregation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made unequal voter registration requirements illegal but did not get rid of literacy tests.

(5) The Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned race discrimination in voting practices by federal, state, and local governments. African Americans in the South still faced enormous obstacles in voting, including literacy tests (a reading test used to determine if someone was eligible to register to vote) and other restrictions that resulted in many being unable to vote. In some cases, African Americans faced harassment, intimidation, and physical aggression when they tried to register or vote. As a result of these actions, few African Americans were registered voters, leaving them little political power at the local or national level. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 made literacy tests illegal and provided for the appointment of federal examiners to oversee the registration process in certain areas where there was a history of voter discrimination. Additionally, these areas could not change their voting procedures without getting approval from the federal government. This act shifted the power of qualifying voters from state and local officials to the federal government.

(6) An additional Civil Rights Act, (The Fair Housing Act), was signed into law in April 1968. This act prohibited discrimination related to the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin and sex. This act was a follow-up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and is seen as the final great legislative achievement of the civil rights era.