

The Political Response

READING FOCUS

- What was President Kennedy's approach to civil rights?
- Why did civil rights leaders propose a march on Washington?
- What were the goals of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
- How did African Americans fight to gain voting rights?

MAIN IDEA

Continuous civil rights protests in the 1960s gradually made politicians respond to public opinion and move forward with strong civil rights legislation.

KEY TERMS

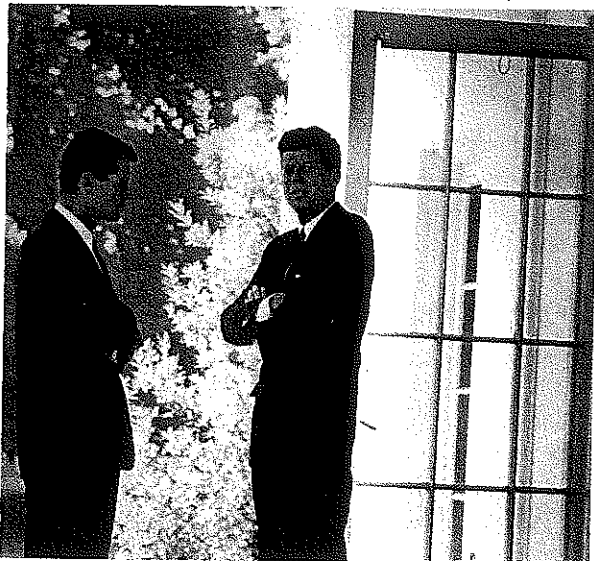
March on Washington
filibuster
cloture
Civil Rights Act of 1964
Voting Rights Act of 1965
Twenty-fourth Amendment

TAKING NOTES

As you read, complete this chart showing some of the provisions of major civil rights legislation passed in the 1960s.

Legislation	Provisions
Civil Rights Act of 1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased Justice Department authority to enforce school desegregation and ensure fair voting practices •
Voting Rights Act of 1965	
Twenty-fourth Amendment	

President Kennedy confers with his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, outside the White House in 1962. Both Kennedy brothers played key roles in the civil rights movement.



Setting the Scene In October 1960, just weeks before the presidential election, John F. Kennedy had an opportunity to make a powerful gesture of goodwill toward African Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been arrested in Georgia and sentenced to four months of hard labor. His family feared for his life in the prison camp. Kennedy called Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's wife, and offered his help. Then, Robert Kennedy, John's younger brother, persuaded the Georgia sentencing judge to release King on bail. Word of the Kennedys' actions spread quickly throughout the African American community, and many switched their votes from Nixon to Kennedy. These votes were crucial in Kennedy's slim margin of victory in the election.

Kennedy on Civil Rights

As a senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy had voted for civil rights measures but had never actively pushed the issue. During his presidential campaign, however, Kennedy had sought and won many African American votes with bold rhetoric. In 1960, he proclaimed, "If the President does not himself wage the struggle for equal rights—if he stands above the battle—then the battle will inevitably be lost."

Once in office, however, Kennedy moved slowly on issues such as fair housing. He did not want to anger southern Democratic senators whose votes he needed on other issues. Yet Kennedy did appoint a number of African Americans to prominent positions. For example, Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African American Supreme Court Justice, joined the United States Circuit Court under Kennedy. At the same time, however, Kennedy also named a number of segregationists to federal courts.

As the civil rights movement gained momentum and violence began to spread, Kennedy could no longer avoid the issue. He was deeply disturbed by the scenes of violence in

the South that flooded the media. The race riots surrounding the Freedom Rides in 1961 embarrassed the President when he met with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. Observers around the world watched the brutality in Birmingham early in 1963. Aware that he had to respond, Kennedy spoke to the American people on television:

“ We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom, here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes? . . . The time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise.”

—President John F. Kennedy, television address, June 1963

Hours after Kennedy’s broadcast, civil rights leader Medgar Evers was gunned down outside his home. Evers had been an NAACP field secretary in Mississippi. He worked on recruiting NAACP members and organized various voter-registration drives throughout the state. Police charged a white supremacist, Byron de la Beckwith, with the murder. After two hung juries failed to convict him, Beckwith was set free in 1964. (Beckwith was convicted of murder in 1994 after the case was reopened.) The timing of the Evers murder made it clear that the government needed to take action.

Earlier in his term, Kennedy had proposed a modest civil rights bill. After the crisis in Birmingham, he introduced a far stronger one. The bill would prohibit segregation in public places, ban discrimination wherever federal funding was involved, and advance school desegregation. Powerful southern segregationists in Congress, however, kept the bill from coming up for a vote.

The March on Washington

To focus national attention on Kennedy’s bill, civil rights leaders proposed a march on Washington, D.C. Kennedy feared the march would alienate Congress and cause racial violence. Yet when he could not persuade organizers to call off the march, he gave it his support.

The **March on Washington** took place in August 1963. More than 200,000 people came from all over the country to call for “jobs and freedom,” the official slogan of the march. Labor leader A. Philip Randolph directed the march. Participants included religious leaders and celebrities such as writer James Baldwin, entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr., and baseball player Jackie Robinson. Leading folk singers of the early 1960s, such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, were also there. Dylan’s powerful protest song “Blowin’ in the Wind” was performed at the march by the popular group Peter, Paul, and Mary:

*“ How many years can a mountain exist
Before it’s washed to the sea?
Yes, ‘n’ how many years can some people exist
Before they’re allowed to be free.
Yes, ‘n’ how many times can a man turn his head,
Pretending he just doesn’t see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind,
The answer is blowin’ in the wind.”*

—Bob Dylan, ©1962

READING CHECK

Why did civil rights violence embarrass Kennedy when he met with world leaders?

VIEWING HISTORY Bob Dylan raised social consciousness about civil rights issues with his songs. Here, he plays on the back porch of the SNCC office in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1963. **Determining Relevance** Why do you think music played an important role in the civil rights movement?





Martin Luther King, Jr. (above), delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington (below) in 1963.



Sounds of an Era

Listen to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and other sounds from the civil rights movement.

The march was peaceful and orderly. After many songs and speeches, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered what was to become his best-known address. With power and eloquence, he spoke to all Americans:

KEY DOCUMENTS

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. . . . When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

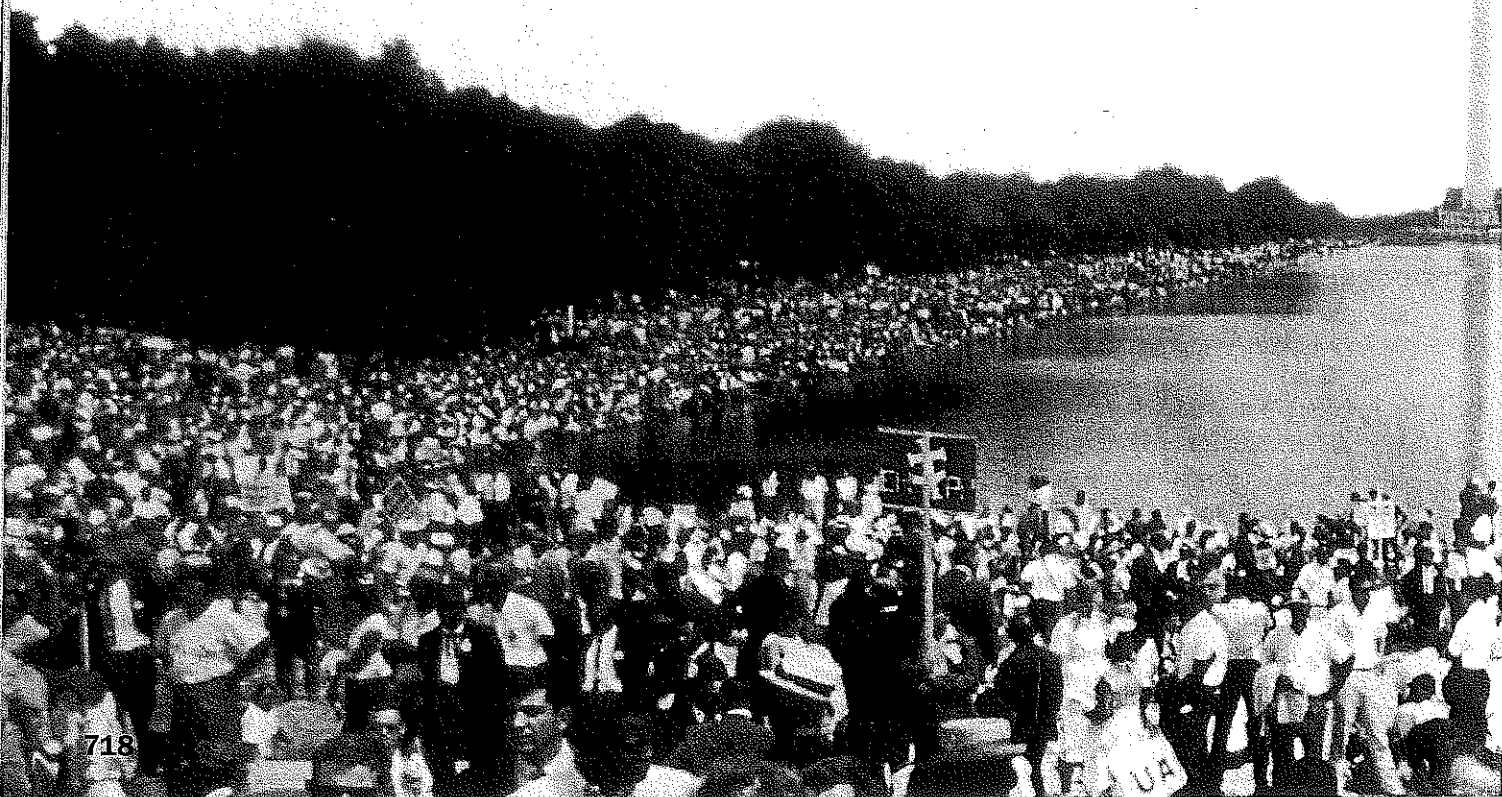
—"I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963

King's words echoed around the country. President Kennedy, watching the speech on television, was impressed with King's skill. But still the civil rights bill remained stalled in Congress.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

Three months after the March on Washington, President Kennedy was assassinated, and his civil rights bill was not much closer to passage. The new President, Lyndon Johnson, was finally able to move the legislation along.

Johnson's Role Lyndon Johnson, a former member of Congress from Texas, had voted against civil rights measures during the Truman administration. As Senate majority leader, however, he had worked successfully to get a civil rights bill passed in 1957. Upon becoming President, he was eager to use his



political skills to build support for Kennedy's bill. In his first public address, he told Congress and the country that nothing "could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill." Johnson promised African American leaders that he would push for the measure "with every energy [he] possessed," and he made good on that commitment.

Johnson let Congress know that he would accept no compromise on civil rights. After the House of Representatives passed the bill, civil rights opponents in the Senate started a lengthy **filibuster**, exercising their right of unlimited day-and-night debate. (A filibuster is a tactic in which senators prevent a vote on a measure by taking the floor and refusing to stop talking.) Johnson finally enlisted his former colleague, Republican minority leader Everett Dirksen, to support the rarely used procedure called **cloture**—a procedure that may be used to limit or end debate and call for a vote. In June 1964, the Senate voted for cloture, which successfully ended the filibuster. Soon after, the bill passed with support from both Democrats and Republicans.

The Provisions of the Act The **Civil Rights Act of 1964** had an impact on many areas, including voting, schools, and jobs. It gave the Justice Department the authority to act vigorously in school desegregation and voting rights cases. The law's major sections (called titles) included these provisions:

1. Title I banned the use of different voter registration standards for blacks and whites.
2. Title II prohibited discrimination in public accommodations, such as motels, restaurants, gas stations, theaters, and sports arenas.
3. Title VI allowed the withholding of federal funds from public or private programs that practice discrimination.
4. Title VII banned discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin by employers and unions, and also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to investigate charges of job discrimination.

Focus on CITIZENSHIP

A Profile in Courage When Congress voted on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, southern Congressmen opposed to racial discrimination faced a difficult choice: If they voted for civil rights, they risked losing reelection. Only one representative from a state in the Deep South, Charles Weltner of Georgia, voted for the bill.



In 1966, Weltner faced another moral dilemma. At that time, the Democratic Party required all its members to take an oath of support for all Democratic candidates. The oath meant that Weltner would have to support a vehement segregationist, Lester Maddox, for governor of Georgia. Weltner shocked the country when he decided to give up his seat in Congress rather than support Maddox. Weltner's action meant the end of his congressional career. Years later, in 1991, he received the prestigious "Profile in Courage" Award for his heroism.



Civil Rights Measures

Measure	Purpose
Truman's Executive Orders, 1948	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required equality in the armed forces • Established the Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services • Banned discrimination in the hiring of federal employees
Civil Rights Act of 1957	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established a federal Civil Rights Commission • Created a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice • Increased efforts to protect voting rights
Civil Rights Act of 1960	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened the 1957 act by giving courts more power to enforce fair voting practices • Prescribed criminal penalties for bombing and bomb threats
Kennedy's Executive Orders, 1962	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased enforcement of previous acts and the <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> ruling • Prohibited racial and religious discrimination in housing built or purchased with federal aid
Twenty-fourth Amendment, 1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminated the poll tax as a voting requirement
Civil Rights Act of 1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banned discrimination in public accommodations • Authorized the attorney general to institute suits to desegregate schools • Outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of race, sex, or religion • Furthered efforts at protecting voting rights
Voting Rights Act of 1965	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminated literacy tests as a voting requirement • Gave federal officials the power to supervise voter registration
Open Housing Law, 1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of most housing



Fighting for the Vote

Even with a strong new law, change came slowly. Civil rights leaders pushed harder for expanded rights, most notably voting rights.

Freedom Summer In 1964, leaders of the major civil rights groups organized a voter registration drive in Mississippi. About a thousand African American and white volunteers, mostly college students, joined in what came to be called Freedom Summer. Many white Mississippians were already angry about the new Civil Rights Act before the volunteers arrived. The Ku Klux Klan held rallies to intimidate the volunteers.

Soon, three young civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, were reported missing. Later in the summer, FBI agents found their bodies buried in a new earthen dam a few miles from where their burned-out station wagon had been found. These three murders were only part of the turbulence reported that summer. Civil rights leaders also reported about 80 mob attacks. Volunteers were beaten up and a few wounded by gunfire. About a thousand were arrested. African American churches and homes were burned or firebombed.

The Democratic Convention Newly registered Mississippi voters, along with members of SNCC, organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP sent delegates to the Democratic national convention in the summer of 1964. The delegates argued that they, not politicians from the state's segregated party organization, were the rightful representatives.

One delegate was Fannie Lou Hamer, who had lost her job on a cotton plantation when she tried to register to vote. She told the convention about her experiences in one voter drive, including a beating in jail:

“ I began to scream, and one white man got up and began to beat me on my head and tell me to ‘hush.’ . . . All of this is on account we want to register, to become first class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America.”

—Fannie Lou Hamer

INTERPRETING CHARTS The federal government passed a significant number of civil rights measures following World War II. **Analyzing Information** (a) Which civil rights issues did each of these measures address? (b) Which do you think were the most effective?

President Johnson offered a compromise to the Freedom Party: he would choose two MFDP delegates to sit among Mississippi's 68 seats. Johnson also promised that the rules of the convention would be changed in 1968 to eliminate

discrimination. Leaders of the MFDP rejected Johnson's offer, believing that it fell short of the gains they were seeking.

The Selma March Many black southerners still had trouble obtaining their voting rights. In Selma, Alabama, police and sheriff's deputies arrested people just for standing in line to register to vote. To call attention to the voting rights issue, King and other leaders decided to organize a protest march. They would walk from Selma to the state capital, Montgomery, about 50 miles away.

As the marchers set out on a Sunday morning in March 1965, armed state troopers on horseback charged into the crowd with whips, clubs, and tear gas. TV pictures of the attack again shocked many viewers. In response, President Johnson put the Alabama National Guard under federal control. He sent members of the National Guard, along with federal marshals and army helicopters, to protect the march route. When the Selma marchers started out again, supporters from all over the country flocked to join them. By the time the march reached Montgomery, its ranks had swelled to about 25,000 people.

The Voting Rights Act Reacting to Selma, Johnson went on national television, promising a strong new law to protect voting rights. Raising his arms, Johnson repeated, "And . . . we . . . shall . . . overcome!" That summer, despite another filibuster, Congress passed the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**.

Under the act, federal officials could register voters in places where local officials were blocking registration by African Americans. The act also effectively eliminated literacy tests and other barriers. In the year after the law passed, more than 400,000 African Americans registered to vote in the Deep South.

Legal Landmarks Together, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 created an entirely new voting population in the South. This new block of voters meant that more black Americans would be elected to political office. Another legal landmark was the **Twenty-fourth Amendment** to the Constitution, ratified in 1964. This amendment outlawed the poll tax, which was still being used in several southern states to keep poor African Americans from voting.

For some African Americans, new laws were not nearly enough. Impatient with the slow pace of progress, they were ready to listen to more militant leaders.



VIEWING HISTORY The Selma March, led here by Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta Scott King, impelled President Johnson to push for the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Between 1960 and 1970, about 2 million new African American voters registered to vote. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** How did the Selma March focus attention on the issue of voting rights?

Section

4

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Why did President Kennedy hesitate at first to support civil rights wholeheartedly? How did his position change?
2. How did the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** overcome the **filibuster** some senators used to try to block it?
3. What events led to the passage of the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

4. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** How did President Johnson's previous experience in Congress help achieve the passage of civil rights legislation?
5. **Writing a News Story** Write a short news story describing the scene at the March on Washington.



Take It to the NET

Activity: Analyzing Primary Sources Access the full text of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Then write an analysis of the speech. To whom was the speech addressed? What terms did King use for persuasion? Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.
www.phschool.com