

Civil Rights in the United States: A Retrospective Look

Civil rights in the United States are often associated with the social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but that period is only one part of the whole story.

To widen the lens of analysis, I suggest considering the post-Civil War (1861–1865) period known as Reconstruction (1865–1877) in conjunction with the mid-twentieth-century social movements, while also assessing the early twenty-first century context.

These three periods are all critical in that they resulted in major changes in the legal, political, and social position of U.S. minorities. In each case, movements sprang from agendas concerning racial rights, followed by demands for gender and sexual equality, and they all brought up questions of individual and political rights, the right to hold elective office, and the delineation of shared social space.

Each period also saw strong reactionary attempts to curtail the progress achieved, culminating in outbursts of racist violence.

Reconstruction

After the Civil War, the most important legislative accomplishments concerning civil rights were passed during Reconstruction. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865, the 14th Amendment granted

civil rights and equality before the law for all adult men in 1868, and the 15th Amendment passed racially impartial suffrage in 1870.

The amendments elevated slaves from property to citizens, allowing freedmen to be fully counted in elections (rather than previously as three-fifths), and they ensured that blacks could also be naturalized as citizens. In practice, however, civil rights rarely materialized; voting rights, in particular, were curtailed by so-called “black codes,” including poll taxes, literacy tests, and property qualifications.

During Reconstruction, fourteen African Americans were elected to the House of Representatives and two to the Senate. Even so, the period did not result in lasting changes. In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case confirmed the “separate but equal” doctrine that legalized racial segregation and white supremacy in the United States, ending the progressive efforts of Reconstruction.

Nearly a century would pass before a third African American entered the U.S. Senate. While there were various organizations tackling civil rights issues in the early twentieth century, the Second Reconstruction burst into full flame

with the social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

These began as grassroots activist efforts, but akin to Reconstruction, they resulted in major legislative victories. Activists, students, and religious leaders took to the streets to bring about social change through tactics combining direct action and disruption. In comparison to Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Era activists wanted more than just rights; they claimed individual and collective power. The black power struggle had a galvanizing effect, inspiring other color power movements, as well as the second women’s rights movement. The color power movements became targets of suppression on various levels, witnessed by unprecedented levels of violence, deaths, and assassinations throughout the country.

The most significant policy effect of the black power movement was that it destroyed the legal basis for segregation. The 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* deemed racial segregation in schools unconstitutional, overturning the **Jim Crow** segregation laws that had followed from *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in public

places and prohibited racial discrimination by employers and unions. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, in turn, invalidated literacy tests, poll taxes, and other practices used to exclude African Americans from voting. These legislative gains in the United States ignited a global freedom struggle for groups of people grappling with histories of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.

“Post-racial era”

After the election of President **Barack Obama** in 2008, some scholars and commentators suggested that an African American presidency signified a de facto “post-racial” era. The claim made was that if a black man could become president of the United States, racism must be over.

The proponents of a “post-racial” United States failed to see the multiple ways in which race, class, and gender intersected in U.S. society. African American and Latino men from lower socioeconomic positions, in particular, became targets of race, class, and gender-based violence. Moreover, minorities continued to grapple with unequal distributions of wealth and income, residential segregation, and mass incarceration.

The Obama presidency was marked by an ebb and flow of progressive accomplishments and counterattacks. The Tea Party, the birtherism movement, and

the populism reflected in the 2016 election fought the administration’s agenda, while Republicans in the Senate openly refused to support any of the President’s initiatives, stalling bipartisan collaboration.

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Obama’s various progressive agendas, such as the Affordable Care Act, *Obergefell v. Hodges*’ legalization of same-sex marriage, the Paris Climate Accord, and DACA, each resulted in reactionary backlash, racial and sexual profiling, and overt acts of violence.

Ongoing negotiation

The 2016 presidential election called attention to existing socioeconomic, cultural, and political tensions in the contemporary United States, with lingering questions of voter suppression and voter ID laws, mechanisms by means of which minority voters in particular can be hindered from voting.

Growing rifts between various groups were expressed in the Black Lives Matter grassroots movement as well as the resurgence of various white nationalist movements. While the Black Lives Matter

group’s mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on black communities, the most prominent white supremacist group, the Alt Right, believes that white civilization is threatened by immigration, multiculturalism,

and political correctness.

The 2016 election also gave rise to the #MeToo movement, which prompted thousands of women to break the silence about their suppressed experiences of sexual harassment and violence, resulting in the resignation of public figures in politics, media, and the entertainment industry.

In sum, while we have obviously made much legal, political, and social progress since the Civil War ended 153 years ago, civil rights are on ongoing negotiation and our work is nowhere near completion.

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