Expanding Inclusivity Through Constitutional Change

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The impetus to create a more inclusive society by making changes to the Constitution has always come from the citizens of the United States, not from the legislature, the judiciary, or the executive branches of the government. Since the turn of the twentieth century, changes to the Constitution and the laws abolishing discriminatory practices have happened slowly, sometimes taking decades. The impulse and energy for those changes have come from African American people and their allies, as they continue to hold the government and the courts accountable to the citizens. The people who agitate for change have often risked a great deal; some even risk their safety or that of their families to change customs or the law. Even when the Constitution or laws are changed, it sometimes takes generations for the dominant society to accept the right of all people to full democratic participation.

The twentieth century opened many controversies related to the expansion of African American rights and responsibilities. The often violently enforced "system of racial segregation and African American disfranchisement" known as Jim Crow sought to support White supremacy and limit Black agency everywhere.[1] Although Jim Crow targeted Black citizens from the end of the Reconstruction Era, this system of institutional discrimination continued to dominate the first 60 years of the twentieth century. Virtually every social institution in the United States supported segregation, implying that people of color were somehow inferior to White people. This discrimination affected access to education, medical care, travel, housing, restaurants and hotels, and public restrooms throughout the United States. However, African Americans challenged White supremacy through the courts, on the streets, in stores, and in other public spaces.[2]

EXPANDING POLITICAL RIGHTS

Political rights expanded when women won the legal right to vote in 1920 after 70 years of campaigning. The Nineteenth Amendment states that the right to vote cannot be abridged because of sex. In practice, however, many women of color struggled to access this basic political right because individual states determine the specific details of voter eligibility. Native American women and men, barred from United States citizenship until 1924, continued to be denied access to the polls until the 1960s. African American women, particularly in southern states, suffered the same state-level discriminatory practices that African American men had suffered for decades. In addition, people of color who attempted to vote often faced hostility or violence from racist individuals at polling places. However, the challenges of accessing voting rights did not stop people of color from voting.

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[1] *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from the Civil War to Civil Rights,* eds., Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

[2] For more on Black resistance to Jim Crow, see Dailey, Gilmore, and Simon, eds., *Jumpin' Jim Crow*; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Gretchen Sorin, *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2020).

From the 1910s until the 1970s, as many as six million African American people moved from the oppression of the South into the northern, midwestern, and western United States. This Great Migration afforded African Americans more economic opportunities, relief from laws "that would regulate every aspect of black people's lives," and freedom from the terrorism of a revitalized Ku Klux Klan that targeted African Americans.[3] After settling in the North, African Americans pushed for fair housing, access to better education, integrated public transportation, and other rights available to U.S. citizens.[4] Some African Americans embraced Black nationalism and racial separation. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) emerged as one of this movement's leaders and founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to support a "back to Africa" movement. Many Black people found his views too controversial, but his ideology influenced the Black Power Movement.[5]

Episodes of lynching, a terrifying form of mob violence, increased following the end of Reconstruction and continued into the twentieth century. African American academics, such as Monroe Work (1866–1945), and journalists, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), collected data and wrote articles about lynching.

James Van Der Zee documented African American life during the Harlem Renaissance. This photograph shows a middle-class family in Harlem. The man was a member of Marcus Garvey's African Legion in 1924. Museum of Modern Art (SC2008.1.101). This image is used with permission. James Van Der Zee Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Richard Benson.

[3] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 40.

[4] In addition to Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, see Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2002); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011); Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2015); and Herb Boyd, *Black Detroit: A People's History of Self-Determination* (New York: Amistad, 2018).

[5] For more about Marcus Garvey, see Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and "Marcus Garvey," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed February 17, 2023, https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/individuals/marcus-garvey. See also Marcus Garvey, *The Tragedy of White Injustice* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, [1935] 2017).

Campaigns against lynching invoked the law as well as the Constitution. North Carolina Representative George Henry White (1852–1918), at the time the only African American in Congress, introduced an anti-lynching bill in the House of Representatives in 1900. Various legislatures introduced about 240 anti-lynching bills before the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, named after a 14-year-old African American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955, finally passed in March 2022.[6]

The founding of the interracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 offered another approach to resisting lynching and other forms of violence against African American people. Founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary White Ovington (1865–1951), and others, the NAACP focused on court cases related to discrimination in employment, government, and education. The establishment of African American organizations, such as the Afro-American League, the Afro-American Council, the National Association of Colored Women, the Niagara Movement, and conferences for the Study of the Negro Problems predated the NAACP's founding, and the organization continues to hold the government and the court system accountable for equality for all U.S. citizens.

WORLD WARS AND THE GREAT MIGRATION

Two world wars took place in the first half of the twentieth century, and many African American women and men believed it was their responsibility to serve their country. About 200,000 African American men joined the U.S. Army during the First World War. However, despite their military training, many were forced to do heavy labor on the docks and railway lines in France rather than fight the German Army. The 369th Infantry Regiment fought with French troops rather than with the American division. The regiment proved itself in combat and received the *Croix de Guerre*, the highest military honor France could bestow, and 171 decorations for individual heroism. Lieutenant James Reese Europe (1881–1919), who led the 369th Harlem Hell Fighters Regiment band, became famous for introducing jazz to Europe.

Black women sought assignments as nurses, likely caring for fellow African American service members, and some of those who could "pass" as White served in hospitals and medical tents. Still, racist policies limiting medical assignments for most African American women made it difficult for them to provide medical care to Black soldiers. Addie Waites Hunton (1875–1943) and Kathryn Magnolia Johnson (1878–1954) succeeded in getting to France through their positions with the YMCA, and African American pianist and composer Helen Eugenia Hagan (1891–1964) entertained soldiers overseas.[7] The record of African American contributions was remarkable, despite discriminatory policies and behavior from the U.S. military and White soldiers.[8]

During World War II (1941–1945), more than a million African American women and men served in every branch of the Armed Forces. They conspicuously fought with distinction in every arena of war. Yet, as veterans, they continued to face civil rights issues at home.

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[6] Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017); Public Law No: 117-107 (Emmett Till Antilynching Actl), Congress.gov, accessed February 10, 2023, https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/55/text.

[7] Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, *Two Colored Women With the American Expeditionary Forces* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Eagle Press, c.1920, https://archive.org/details/twocoloredwomenw00huntiala/page/n7/mode/2up.

[8] Kimberly Jensen, *Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 118–20; J. Patrick Lewis, *Harlem Hellfighters* (Mankato: Creative Editions, 2014); Peter Nelson, *A More Unbending Battle: The Harlem Hellfighters' Struggle for Freedom in WWI and Equality at Home* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009); Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider, *Into the Breach: American Women Overseas in World War I* (New York: Viking, 1991), especially, chapter 6, "The Black Record," 168–176.

Between the wars, African Americans engaged in the "New Negro Movement," an intellectual and artistic revolution known today as the Harlem Renaissance. Connected to the resurgence of civil rights activism, African American literature, poetry, dance, and music both reflected and sparked a renewed interest in African American culture. Cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., and others in the West experienced the same thrilling cultural awakening.[9] Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), novelist James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), poet Langston Hughes (1901–1967), artist Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), band leaders Louis Armstrong (1901–1971) and Duke Ellington (1899–1974), and numerous others helped many African Americans find opportunities in business and other professions. Art and racial pride helped Black people prove they had humanity and the right to equality, laying a foundation for increased civil rights activism.

POST–WORLD WAR II

African Americans challenged segregation in transportation, housing, and education. They also boycotted businesses that refused to cater to African American customers. By 1954, with the combined support of the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union, the Supreme Court finally ended the era of "separate but equal" in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).[10] African Americans defied segregation on buses when individuals, such as teenager Claudette Colvin (1939–), sat in "Whites only" sections. This strategy accelerated when Rosa Parks (1913–2005) was arrested after she refused to give up her seat to a White passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. She and other African American leaders organized a boycott of the buses in the city. In conjunction with the boycott, local activists challenged the legality of government-mandated segregation on buses in *Browder v. Gayle* (1956). Eventually, the case reached the Supreme Court, which declared such laws unconstitutional because they violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.[11]

The bus boycott's effectiveness prompted a new phase of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) emerged as a leading figure. Influenced by the methods of nonviolent civil disobedience practiced by anti-colonial activist Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) in India, King encouraged these strategies even when he was abused, arrested, and his house was bombed. The charismatic King traveled millions of miles, gave hundreds of speeches, and wrote numerous articles and books. He was also arrested 20 times. Other leaders, such as Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977), suffered similarly. Hamer joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to help protect African American people's right to vote. Arrested and beaten while in jail, she suffered from her injuries for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, Hamer continued to agitate for voting rights, participation in political delegations, and, later, economic rights.[12] Many people, including young students, demonstrated for civil rights.

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[9] For more on the national experience of the Harlem Renaissance, see Cary D. Wintz, "The Harlem Renaissance in the American West," Black Past, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/harlem-renaissance-american-west/. There are many books on the Harlem Renaissance, including Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Fine Books [1925], 2015); *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era,* eds., Lean'tin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017); Flannery Burke, *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan's* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016); Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1992); *The Harlem Renaissance in the American West: The New Negro's Western Experience,* eds. Cary D. Wintz and Bruce A. Glasrud, (New York: Routledge Press, 2011); and Wil Haygood, *I Too Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2018).

[10] "History: *Brown v. Board of Education* Re-enactment," United States Courts, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/history-brown-v-board-education-re-enactment.

[11] Donnie Williams and Wayne Greenhaw, *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 2007); "The Montgomery Bus Boycott," National Park Service, updated September 21, 2022, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/articles/montgomery-bus-boycott.htm.

[12] Keisha N. Blain, *Until I am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America* (New York: Beacon Press, 2021); Debra Michals, "Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977)," National Women's History Museum, updated 2017, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer.

Lincoln Memorial Youth March for Integrated Schools, October 25, 1958. National Archives and Records Administration (NAID: 175539930).

The Civil Rights Movement drew attention from around the world. King won the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership and strategies in 1964. He donated his prize money to the Civil Rights Movement.[13] That same year, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in public places, required integration in schools and other public institutions, and made discrimination in employment illegal.[14] The next year, Congress enacted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which made it illegal to prevent African Americans from exercising their constitutional right to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment.[15] Tragically, in 1968, while preparing to lead another protest march, King was assassinated. Despite their grief at the loss of an important leader, African American people continued to agitate for equal rights.

The end of the 1960s finally saw the end of "legal" Jim Crow, and everywhere people took down signs designating separate facilities for African Americans. But that did not guarantee equality. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in 1966, was a militant Black power organization. In addition to providing services, including transportation, food, and clothing, to the Black community, Panthers challenged the police, protected African Americans from violence, and confronted politicians.[16] By the 1970s, the Black Power Movement, a precursor to the present-day Black Lives Matter movement, emphasized racial pride, access to economic power, cultural and political institutions to celebrate African American achievements, and demands for colleges to offer Black

[13] "Martin Luther King Jr. Biographical," The Nobel Prize, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/biographical/.

[14] "Milestone Documents: Civil Rights Act (1964)," National Archives and Records Administration, updated February 8, 2022, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act

[15] "Milestone Documents: Voting Rights Act (1965)," National Archives and Records Administration, updated February 8, 2022, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act.

[16] "The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed February 15, 2023, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change.

history and studies courses and hire more professors of color. Since 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement, now global in scope, has continued this work, focusing on eradicating White supremacy and violence against African American people today.[17]

African American people broke many racial barriers in the 1980s. Michael Jackson's (1958–2009) album *Thriller*, released in 1982, is the highest-selling album of all time, and he continued to produce popular music, win awards, and engage in philanthropy through the 2000s. Alice Walker (1944–) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction with *The Color Purple* (1983), and Vanessa Williams (1963–) was the first Black woman to be crowned Miss America. African Americans became astronauts, newscasters, talk show hosts, neurosurgeons, anthropologists, and football coaches. Many Black people also won elections and served in Congress, as mayors of major cities, and in various other political offices. Their advocacy for civil rights, as well as broader acceptance of African American people as professionals, continued into the following decade.

Even greater achievements mark the 2000s. The world celebrated the 2008 election of Barack Obama (1961–) to the Presidency. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples."[18]

Barack Obama, elected in 2008, served two terms as the first Black President of the United States. During his second term, he gave a speech at the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery and another at the dedication of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. This photo is from his remarks at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 2015. Official White House Photo by Pete Souza.

[17] "Black Lives Matter," accessed February 10, 2023, https://blacklivesmatter.com/.

[18] "Barack H. Obama: Facts." The Nobel Prize, accessed February 10, 2023, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/facts/.

Increasingly, women of color are entering politics, helping to ensure equal rights for all citizens. Attorney Stacy Abrams (1973–) ran for governor of Georgia in 2018. Although she lost that race, she has become nationally recognized for fighting voter suppression, winning several awards.[19] In 2020, the people of the United States elected Joe Biden as president, who had selected Kamala Harris (1964–), the first woman and first woman of color, as his vice president.

CONCLUSION

Discrimination and violence against African American people continues. As of this writing, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021 has passed the House of Representatives and is in the Senate for consideration. Most people in the United States, Black and White, are angry that police violence continues.[20] Nevertheless, most African Americans take their responsibility as citizens very seriously and continue to contribute to their communities and the larger society through education, voting, volunteering, donating to help those in need, and patronizing Black-owned businesses.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

- Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*
- Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Shaping of Black America: The Struggles and Triumphs of African-Americans, 1619–1990s*
- Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*
- Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*
- Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, eds. *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from the Civil War to Civil Rights*
- St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*
- Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*
- Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*
- Gretchen Sorin, *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights*
- Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*
- Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era*

To learn more about National History Day's Inclusive History Initiative,go to nhd.org/inclusivehistory.

[19] Emma Rothberg, "Stacey Abrams (December 9, 1973–)", National Women's History Museum, accessed February 15, 2023, https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/stacey-abrams.

[20] Matthew Horace and Ron Harris, *The Black and the Blue: A Cop Reveals the Crimes, Racism, and Injustice in America's Law Enforcement* (New York: Legacy Lit, 2019); Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (New York: Beacon Press, 2017); and "Mapping Police Violence," Mapping Police Violence, accessed February 10, 2023, https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/.