

50 Years Later: Remembering Selma

From Bloody Sunday to the Voting Rights Act: How One Day Changed the Course of Civil Rights History

March 7, 1965 – a day that would become known as Bloody Sunday – forever changed the course of American history. That day the nation’s attention turned to Selma, Alabama, where state troopers and a sheriff’s posse brutally attacked 575 demonstrators attempting to march peacefully to Montgomery. The marchers had gathered for two purposes: to advocate for voting rights for African Americans and to protest the murder of a young African American man named Jimmie Lee Jackson, who had been killed by a state trooper a month before during a voter registration march.

A week after Bloody Sunday President Lyndon Johnson delivered an impassioned speech before Congress. In it he said, “Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument: every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to insure that right.” Later that week hearings began on what would later become known as the Voting Rights Act, which President Johnson signed on August 6, 1965.

The Voting Rights Act quickly became one of the most important and effective pieces of civil rights legislation ever passed. Before passage of the act, literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and other state laws had blocked the overwhelming majority of African Americans from voting in the South. After passage of the Act, African American voter registration rates increased dramatically and the number of African Americans holding elected office

increased fivefold in just five years. By 2012 there were more than 9,000 African American elected officials in the United States, including the reelection of the first African American president.

Voting Rights Today

In 2013, however, [the U.S. Supreme Court struck a major blow to the Voting Rights Act](#), striking down a large part of the Act and essentially gutting the heart of the legislation. Almost immediately after the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, [states began enacting discriminatory voting laws that disproportionately disenfranchise minority voters](#). It is now up to Congress to take action and fix the Voting Rights Act.

As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, join ADL in honoring those who put their lives on the line on March 7, 1965, celebrating the achievements of the Voting Rights Act, and recommitting ourselves to ensure that all eligible Americans can exercise the fundamental right to vote.

Learn More About ADL's Voting Rights Work

- [ADL's Role in Selma in 1965](#)
- [The 50th Anniversary of Selma: Its Legacy and Enduring Challenges \(Video\)](#)
- [Safeguarding the Right to Vote: ADL's Work on Voting Rights Today](#)
- [FAQ: The Voting Rights Act and *Shelby County v. Holder*](#)
- [Urge Congress to Pass Essential Legislation to Protect the Right to Vote](#)

Resources for Educators and Families

- [The Current Events Classroom: The Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights](#)
- [Curriculum Resources on the Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [Books Matter: Social Justice Book Recommendations for Children](#)

- [Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today \(Curriculum Connections\)](#)

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