



## THE CURRENT EVENTS CLASSROOM

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# THE SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH FOR VOTING RIGHTS

In March 2015, we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights, which led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act later that year. The anniversary provides a good opportunity to teach about activism and voting rights then and now.

After the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which largely addressed racial discrimination and segregation, voting rights for African Americans remained difficult during that time, especially in the South. In the early 1960s, there had been a great deal of organizing and protesting around voting rights and in February 1965 the murder of civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson by state troopers while he was participating in a peaceful voting rights protest led activists to organize a huge protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The purpose of the march was to push for voting rights legislation and it took three attempts to complete the march; the first attempt on March 7 came to be known as “Bloody Sunday” because Alabama state troopers rushed the marchers at the Edmund Pettis Bridge with whips, nightsticks and tear gas and beat them back to Selma. On March 15, President Johnson announced to a joint session of Congress that he would bring them an effective voting rights bill. The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965.

This high school lesson will give students background information about the historical struggle for voting rights and the Selma to Montgomery March that took place in Alabama in March 1965. Students will also explore voting restrictions today and gain insight into what can and should be done to preserve the right to vote.

[**NOTE TO TEACHER:** Because the word “negro” is used in the video and speeches from the 1950s and 60s time period, an explanation about the word is recommended. Explain to students that during that time, the word “negro” was used to describe a person of black ancestry. It was considered to be the most socially appropriate term for African Americans and was accepted as normal until the later part of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s.]

See these additional ADL resources: [The Civil Rights Act of 1964: 7 Ways to Commemorate the Anniversary](#), *Curriculum Connections* “[Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today](#),” [Civil Rights Movement](#), [Teaching About Ferguson and Beyond](#), [10 Ways Youth Can Engage In Activism](#), [Voting Rights Act Advocacy](#), and [Safeguarding the Right to Vote](#).

**Grade Level:** grades 9–12

**Time:** 45–60 minutes

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will learn about the Selma to Montgomery March and the events leading up to it that took place in Alabama in March 1965.
- Students will learn about voting restrictions today as a result of voter suppression laws and the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* Supreme Court ruling.
- Students will examine and reflect upon videos and photographs from that time period and write a short news article based on a photograph.
- Students will gain insight from discussing school elections in order to explore what actions can be taken to address voting rights today.

**Material:**

- [Selma to Montgomery March Background](#) (one copy for each student)
- *March from Selma to Montgomery* video (5 min., History.com, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act/videos/march-from-selma-to-montgomery?m=528e394da93ae&s=undefined&f=1&free=false](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act/videos/march-from-selma-to-montgomery?m=528e394da93ae&s=undefined&f=1&free=false))
- Photography exhibit from “These Rare Photos of the Selma March Place You in the Thick of History” (Smithsonian.com, January 14, 2015, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/rare-photos-selma-march-thick-history-180953874/?no-ist](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/rare-photos-selma-march-thick-history-180953874/?no-ist))
- “Blacking Out the Vote” (*The Huffington Post*, The Blog, November 3, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-w-murphy/blacking-out-the-vote\\_b\\_6096566.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-w-murphy/blacking-out-the-vote_b_6096566.html)), one copy for each student

**Vocabulary:**

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s “[Glossary of Education Terms](#).”)

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|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| • activism           | • illiterate   | • preclearance       | • segregation |
| • civil disobedience | • intimidation | • protest            |               |
| • disenfranchise     | • legislation  | • racially motivated |               |
| • enacted            | • non-violent  | • restrictions       |               |
| • equal rights       | • partisan     | • sacrifices         |               |

**INFORMATION SHARING: SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH**

1. Ask students: *What do you know about the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s? What do you know about voting rights? Have you ever heard of Selma, Alabama and if so, what happened there in 1965? Do you know anyone who was alive during that time period and what have they told you about it?* Allow students to share for several minutes. Explain that March 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March in Alabama, which led to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
2. Distribute one copy of the handout [Selma to Montgomery March Background](#) to each student and either summarize it for the students or read aloud together, having students take turns.

3. After reading the background information, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
- What did you learn that you did not know before?
  - How do you think the protestors felt before, during and after the march from Selma to Montgomery?
  - Why did the protestors feel so strongly that they risked violence and even death?
  - What do you think it was like to be a spectator of the march during that time period?
  - What was lost? What was accomplished?
  - How would you feel if some people were allowed to vote and others were not—for example, in school elections? What are some ways you think people could restrict your right to vote?

### VIDEO VIEWING: MARCH FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY

1. Play the 5-minute video [March from Selma to Montgomery](#) that tells the story of the historic march. Encourage students to take notes on what is noteworthy to them.
2. After watching the video, have students take three minutes to write down their reflections from the video, responding to any or all of the following questions. (Write the questions on the board/smartboard for students to refer to.)
  - How did you feel while watching the video?
  - What stands out for you from what you saw in the video?
  - What did you learn that you didn't know?
  - What characteristics and personality traits would you use to describe the organizers and protesters?
3. After jotting down notes, have students turn and talk to a person sitting near them and share their notes with their partner. Give students five minutes for this.
4. Ask if anyone would like to share any of their reflections.

### PHOTOGRAPH REFLECTIONS

Show to students the online photography exhibit from the article "[These Rare Photos of the Selma March Place You in the Thick of History](#)," which includes 15 photos from the march. You can either project the photos on the board/smartboard or print them out and hang them around the room. Looking at one photo at a time, have students respond to the following three questions about each:

- What's going on in the picture?
- What do you think the person/people are thinking and feeling?
- If you could ask the person/people in the photos a question, what would you ask?

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**Optional:** If time permits, have each student select one of the photos and write a short (2–3 paragraphs) news story about it. Students can use the caption at the bottom of the photo as the first sentence in the story and then write the rest, using what they already know and have learned in the lesson. Have students read their news stories aloud with the rest of the class.

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## READING ACTIVITY: VOTING RESTRICTIONS TODAY

1. Explain to students that although sweeping legislation was passed in 1965 regarding voting rights, serious problems remain. Tell students that over the past few years, many states have enacted specific voting laws that restrict voting which include (1) requiring voter ID and/or proof of citizenship, (2) restricting early in-person voting and (3) making voter registration more difficult. These laws disenfranchise eligible voters, and disproportionately affect people of color, the elderly, young voters, and those who live in poverty.
2. In addition, explain that a 2013 Supreme Court case called *Shelby County v. Holder* struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). It held that Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which sets out the formula that is used to determine which state and local governments must comply with Section 5's preclearance requirement, is unconstitutional and can no longer be used. This means that the formula used to decide which places would have to preclear their laws was outdated and will no longer be used. (For more information, see [The Voting Rights Act and Shelby County v. Holder.](#))
3. Have students silently read the article "[Blacking Out the Vote](#)" or assign it the night before for homework. Give students 10 minutes to read the article.
4. After reading the article, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What point of view does the article convey?
  - How does the author connect the Voting Rights Act to current day strategies that deny people the right to vote?
  - Why is voting such an important part of the democratic process?
  - Do you think the anniversary of Selma is a cause for celebration or mourning? Why?

## CLOSING: ACTIVISM

1. Ask students: *How many students do you think vote in school elections? Why do you think some people don't vote? How would you feel and what would you do if certain people were restricted from voting?*
2. Make the connection between their reflections on student elections to the Voting Rights Act and ask: *Given everything you've learned about Selma and the history of voting rights in the United States, what can we do to preserve voting rights?* Chart their responses on the board. As a follow-up, have students learn more about voting rights and restrictions today, what some groups are doing about it (both locally and nationally) and determine if there is a way students can participate in those efforts.

## ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- "[5 days, 50 miles: The march that changed history](#)" (CBS News)
- "[Alabama Police Use Gas and Clubs to Rout Negroes](#)" (*The New York Times*, March 7, 1965)
- "[Is The Voting Rights Act Still Needed?](#)" (*The New York Times*, Room for Debate, February 24, 2014)
- "[Map: 22 states have passed new voting restrictions over the past four years](#)" (*The Washington Post*, June 17, 2014)
- *March: Book One* and *March: Book Two* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin (graphic novels for teens)
- [March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama](#) (Eyes on the Prize)

- [Protecting Minority Voters: Our Work is Not Done](#) (National Commission on Voting Rights, 2014)
- [Safeguarding the Right to Vote](#) (Anti-Defamation League)
- [Selma to Montgomery March](#) (History.com)
- [“The Big Parade: On the Road to Montgomery”](#) (*The New York Times* Learning Network)
- [“Vintage photos: MLK and the Selma-Montgomery marches”](#) (*Houston Chronicle*, January 13, 2015)
- [Voting Laws Roundup 2015](#) (Brennan Center for Justice)
- [Voting Rights Act](#) (History.com)
- [Voting Rights Act](#) (ACLU)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Writing
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH BACKGROUND

- The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's came about from the need and desire for equality and freedom for African Americans and other people of color. Nearly one hundred years after slavery was abolished, there was widespread segregation, discrimination, voter disenfranchisement and racially motivated violence that permeated all personal and structural aspects of life for black people. During this period of time, there was a huge surge of activism taking place to reverse this discrimination and injustice. Activists worked together and used non-violent protest and specific acts of targeted civil disobedience in order to bring about change. Much of this organizing and activism took place in the Southern part of the United States; however, people from all over the country—of all races and religions—joined activists to proclaim their support and commitment to freedom and equality. Between 1954 and 1968, important civil rights legislation was enacted.
- In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed which dealt largely with racial discrimination and desegregation. Voting disenfranchisement remained a major problem as black voters were turned away from voting in a variety of ways, especially in parts of the Deep South. Civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) attempted to register black voters and were met with resistance. Black people were legally allowed to vote but were prevented from voting by a variety of strategies including: (1) literacy tests (which illiterate whites were enabled to bypass using a “grandfather clause,”) (2) poll taxes, which required some people to pay a fixed rate in order to vote and (3) ongoing and regular intimidation of voters by individuals and groups.
- The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded by the young people who initiated the 1960 sit-in movement and in the early 1960s, they had moved into the Deep South where majority-black communities had begun to work with residents around the issue of voter registration. In early 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC decided to make Selma, Alabama the focus of a voter registration campaign and joined with SNCC to begin organizing. Selma was chosen because only 2% of Selma's eligible black voters had managed to register. Also, because Alabama Governor George Wallace was a strong opponent of desegregation and the local county sheriff had led opposition to black voter registration drives, it presented an opportunity to show the world what was happening in places like Selma with voting rights. Organizers wanted to make their point clear and Selma seemed like the right place to do it.
- There had been a great deal of organizing and protesting in the works around voter registration. In February 1965, the murder of civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson by state troopers while he was participating in a peaceful voting rights protest led organizers to plan a huge protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to push for a Voting Rights Act. It was 54 miles and would take several days.
- The presence of news reporters who took notes, photos and film in order to document and share what was happening with the rest of the country—especially the violence directed toward the non-violent protestors—motivated others from around the country to come to Selma and if not attend, join in spirit. “Those scenes were etched in America's memories” said reporter Bill Plante, a CBS reporter who was reporting on the March.

- There were three attempts to walk from Selma to Montgomery in 1965:
  - The first attempt was on March 7, which is now known as “Bloody Sunday.” A group of 600 people started off in Selma, Alabama. State troopers and a sheriff’s posse with whips, nightsticks and tear gas rushed the group at the Edmund Pettis Bridge (about ½ mile into the march) and beat them back to Selma. The bloody scene was captured on television and angered many people in the United States watching it on TV, drawing many people—of all races and religions—to Selma in protest.
  - The second attempt, two days later on March 9, came to be known as “Turnaround Tuesday,” because as the protesters crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they saw flashing lights, police cars and helmeted troopers carrying shotguns. Dr. King led the group in prayer and then turned the marchers around. That evening, James Reeb, a white minister who had come from Boston for the protest, was attacked and beaten to death by a group of segregationists.
  - The third attempt, on March 21, was successful. With 8,000 people, representing all races and religions, setting off in Selma protected by U.S. Army troops and the Alabama National Guard forces (ordered by President Lyndon Johnson) they walked for 12 hours a day and reached Montgomery on March 25. More than 25,000 supporters met the marchers in Montgomery where they gathered to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other speakers.
- On March 15, President Johnson announced to a joint session of Congress that he would bring them an effective voting rights bill. About five months later, on August 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law. The law guaranteed the right to vote for African Americans by banning voting practices or procedures that discriminate on the bases of race, color, or membership in a language minority group. In addition, the law specifically banned literacy tests and required federal oversight of voter registration in areas where tests had previously been used. It also required federal “preclearance” before covered jurisdictions (i.e., specified jurisdictions with a history of practices that restrict minority voting rights) may make changes in existing voting practices or procedures.