**THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

**American civil rights movement,** mass protest movement against [racial segregation](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/488135/racial-segregation) and discrimination in the southern [United States](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States) that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s. This movement had its roots in the centuries-long efforts of African slaves and their descendants to resist [racial oppression](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/488187/racism) and abolish the institution of [slavery](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/548305/slavery). Although American slaves were emancipated as a result of the Civil War and were then granted basic civil rights through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution, struggles to secure federal protection of these rights continued during the next century. Through nonviolent protest, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s broke the pattern of public facilities’ being segregated by [“race”](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/488030/race) in the [South](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/555542/the-South) and achieved the most important breakthrough in equal-rights legislation for [African Americans](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/67474/African-Americans) since the [Reconstruction](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/493722/Reconstruction) period (1865–77). Although the passage in 1964 and 1965 of major civil rights legislation was victorious for the movement, by then militant black activists had begun to see their struggle as a freedom or liberation movement not just seeking civil rights reforms but instead confronting the enduring economic, political, and cultural consequences of past racial oppression.

**Abolitionism to Jim Crow**

American history has been marked by persistent and determined efforts to expand the scope and inclusiveness of civil rights. Although equal rights for all were affirmed in the founding documents of the United States, many of the new country’s inhabitants were denied essential rights. African slaves and indentured servants did not have the inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that British colonists asserted to justify their [Declaration of Independence](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285012/Declaration-of-Independence). Nor were they included among the “People of the United States” who established the [Constitution](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/134197/Constitution-of-the-United-States-of-America) in order to “promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Instead, the [Constitution](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/134197/Constitution-of-the-United-States-of-America) protected [slavery](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/548305/slavery) by allowing the importation of slaves until 1808 and providing for the return of slaves who had escaped to other states.

As the United States expanded its boundaries, Native American peoples resisted conquest and absorption. Individual states, which determined most of the rights of American citizens, generally limited voting rights to white property-owning males, and other rights—such as the right to own land or serve on juries—were often denied on the basis of racial or gender distinctions. A small proportion of [African Americans](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/67474/African-Americans) lived outside the slave system, but those so-called “free blacks” endured racial discrimination and enforced segregation. Although some slaves violently rebelled against their enslavement African Americans and other subordinated groups mainly used nonviolent means—protests, legal challenges, pleas and petitions addressed to government officials, as well as sustained and massive civil rights movements—to achieve gradual improvements in their status.

During the first half of the 19th century, movements to extend voting rights to non-property-owning white male laborers resulted in the elimination of most property qualifications for voting, but this expansion of [suffrage](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/571785/suffrage) was accompanied by brutal suppression of American Indians and increasing restrictions on free blacks. Slave owners in [the South](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/555542/the-South) reacted to the 1831 [Nat Turner](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/610295/Nat-Turner) slave revolt in Virginia by passing laws to discourage antislavery activism and prevent the teaching of slaves to read and write. Despite this repression, a growing number of African Americans freed themselves from slavery by escaping or negotiating agreements to purchase their freedom through wage labour. By the 1830s, free black communities in the Northern states had become sufficiently large and organized to hold regular national conventions, where black leaders gathered to discuss alternative strategies of racial advancement. In 1833 a small minority of whites joined with black antislavery activists to form the [American Anti-Slavery Society](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/19269/American-Anti-Slavery-Society) under the leadership of [William Lloyd Garrison](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/226208/William-Lloyd-Garrison).

[Frederick Douglass](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/170246/Frederick-Douglass) became the most famous of the ex-slaves who joined the [abolition movement](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1448/abolitionism). His autobiography—one of many [slave narratives](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/548224/slave-narrative)—and his stirring orations heightened public awareness of the horrors of slavery. Although black leaders became increasingly militant in their attacks against slavery and other forms of racial oppression, their efforts to secure equal rights received a major setback in 1857, when the U.S. [Supreme Court](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/574815/Supreme-Court-of-the-United-States) rejected African American citizenship claims. The [Dred Scott decision](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/171273/Dred-Scott-decision) stated that the country’s founders had viewed blacks as so inferior that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” This ruling—by declaring unconstitutional the [Missouri Compromise](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/385744/Missouri-Compromise) (1820), through which Congress had limited the expansion of slavery into western territories—ironically strengthened the antislavery movement, because it angered many whites who did not own slaves. The inability of the country’s political leaders to resolve that dispute fueled the successful presidential campaign of [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/341682/Abraham-Lincoln), the candidate of the antislavery [Republican Party](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498842/Republican-Party). Lincoln’s victory in turn prompted the Southern slave states to secede and form the [Confederate States of America](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/131803/Confederate-States-of-America) in 1860–61.

Although Lincoln did not initially seek to abolish slavery, his determination to punish the rebellious states and his increasing reliance on black soldiers in the Union army prompted him to issue the [Emancipation Proclamation](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/185468/Emancipation-Proclamation) (1863) to deprive the Confederacy of its slave property. After the [American Civil War](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/19407/American-Civil-War) ended, Republican leaders cemented the Union victory by gaining the ratification of constitutional amendments to abolish slavery ([Thirteenth Amendment](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/592556/Thirteenth-Amendment)) and to protect the legal equality of ex-slaves ([Fourteenth Amendment](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215201/Fourteenth-Amendment)) and the voting rights of male ex-slaves ([Fifteenth Amendment](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/206459/Fifteenth-Amendment)). Despite those constitutional guarantees of rights, almost a century of civil rights agitation and litigation would be required to bring about consistent federal enforcement of those rights in the former Confederate states. Moreover, after federal military forces were removed from the South at the end of [Reconstruction](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/493722/Reconstruction), white leaders in the region enacted new laws to strengthen the “[Jim Crow](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/303897/Jim-Crow-law)” system of [racial segregation](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/488135/racial-segregation) and discrimination. In its [*Plessy* v. *Ferguson*](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/464679/Plessy-v-Ferguson) decision (1896), the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities for African Americans did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment, ignoring evidence that the facilities for blacks were inferior to those intended for whites.

The Southern system of [white supremacy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/642638/white-supremacy) was accompanied by the expansion of European and American imperial control over nonwhite people in Africa and Asia as well as in island countries of the Pacific and Caribbean regions. Like African Americans, most nonwhite people throughout the world were colonized or economically exploited and denied basic rights, such as the right to vote. With few exceptions, women of all races everywhere were also denied suffrage rights).

**[Du Bois](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172481/W-E-B-Du-Bois) to *Brown***

During the early decades of the 20h century, movements to resist such racial and gender discrimination gained strength in many countries. While a [Pan-African movement](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/664787/Pan-African-movement) emerged in response to European imperialism, African Americans developed various strategies to challenge racial discrimination in the United States. Educator [Booker T. Washington](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/636363/Booker-T-Washington) emphasized economic development without openly challenging the Jim Crow system, Harvard University-educated scholar [W.E.B. Du Bois](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172481/W-E-B-Du-Bois) became a leading advocate for civil rights and Pan-African unity among African and African descendants elsewhere in the world. In 1909 Du Bois and other African American leaders joined with white proponents of racial equality to form the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/404433/National-Association-for-the-Advancement-of-Colored-People-NAACP) (NAACP), which became the country’s most enduring civil rights organization. Under the leadership of Du Bois, [James Weldon Johnson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/305343/James-Weldon-Johnson), [Walter White](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/642085/Walter-White), [Thurgood Marshall](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/366611/Thurgood-Marshall), and others, the NAACP publicized racial injustices and initiated lawsuits to secure equal treatment for African Americans in education, employment, housing, and public accommodations.

The NAACP faced competition from various groups offering alternative strategies for racial advancement. In 1941 labour leader [A. Philip Randolph](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/491015/A-Philip-Randolph)’s threat to stage a march on [Washington](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/636322/Washington) prodded Pres. [Franklin D. Roosevelt](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/509263/Franklin-D-Roosevelt) to issue an executive order against employment discrimination in the wartime defense industries. The interracial [Congress of Racial Equality](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/488122/Congress-of-Racial-Equality-CORE) (CORE) also undertook small-scale [civil disobedience](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119219/civil-disobedience) to combat segregation in Northern cities.

In the aftermath of [World War II](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II), African American civil rights efforts were hampered by ideological splits. Du Bois and prominent African American entertainer [Paul Robeson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/505612/Paul-Robeson) were among the leftist leaders advocating mass civil rights protests while opposing the [Cold War](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/125110/Cold-War) foreign and domestic policies of Pres. [Harry S. Truman](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/607156/Harry-S-Truman), but Truman prevailed in the [1948 presidential election](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1666731/United-States-presidential-election-of-1948) with critical backing from NAACP leaders and most African Americans able to vote. Marshall and other NAACP leaders gained additional black support when the Supreme Court ruled public school segregation unconstitutional in 1954 in the NAACP-sponsored case of [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/81780/Brown-v-Board-of-Education-of-Topeka).

Yet, even as the NAACP consolidated its national dominance in the civil rights field, local black activists acted on their own to protest racial segregation and discrimination. For example, in 1951 a student walkout at a Virginia high school led by Barbara Johns, age 16, was one of the local efforts that culminated in the Brown decision. When the Supreme Court did not set a time limit for states to desegregate their school systems and instead merely called for desegregation “with all deliberate speed,” the stage was set for years of conflicts over public school desegregation and other discriminatory practices.

**[Montgomery bus boycott](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1097927/Montgomery-bus-boycott) to the** **[Voting Rights Act](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/633044/Voting-Rights-Act)**

In December 1955 NAACP activist [Rosa Parks](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/444180/Rosa-Parks)’s impromptu refusal to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in [Montgomery](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/390918/Montgomery), [Alabama](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/11958/Alabama), sparked a sustained bus [boycott](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/76446/boycott) that inspired mass protests elsewhere to speed the pace of civil rights reform. After boycott supporters chose Baptist minister [Martin Luther King, Jr.](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/318311/Martin-Luther-King-Jr), to head the newly established Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), King soon became the country ’s most influential advocate of the concepts of nonviolent resistance forged by [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/225216/Mohandas-Karamchand-Gandhi). Despite the bombing of King’s house and other acts of intimidation by segregationists, MIA leaders were able to sustain the boycott until November 1956, when the NAACP won a Supreme Court order to desegregate the bus system. In 1957 King and his supporters founded the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/556708/Southern-Christian-Leadership-Conference-SCLC) (SCLC) to provide an institutional framework supporting local protest movements.

Four black college students in [Greensboro](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/245365/Greensboro), North Carolina, sparked a new phase of the Southern civil rights movement on February 1, 1960, when they staged a [sit-in](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546774/sit-in) at a drugstore lunch counter reserved for whites. In the wake of the [Greensboro sit-in](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1659464/Greensboro-sit-in), thousands of students in at least 60 communities, mostly in the upper, urbanized South, joined the [sit-in](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546774/sit-in) campaign during the winter and spring of 1960. Despite efforts by the NAACP, SCLC, and CORE to impose some control over the sit-in movement, the student protesters formed their own group, the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/569887/Student-Nonviolent-Coordinating-Committee-SNCC) (SNCC), to coordinate the new movement. SNCC gradually acquired a staff of full-time organizers, many of whom were former student protesters, and launched a number of local projects designed to achieve desegregation and voting rights. Although SNCC’s nonviolent tactics were influenced by King, SNCC organizers typically stressed the need to develop self-reliant local leaders to sustain grassroots movements.

The [Freedom Rides](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/218576/Freedom-Rides) of 1961 signaled the beginning of a period when civil rights protest activity grew in scale and intensity. CORE sponsored the first group of bus riders who sought to desegregate Southern bus terminals. After attacks by white mobs in Alabama turned back the initial protesters, student activists from Nashville and other centers of sit-in activities continued the rides into [Jackson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/298755/Jackson), Mississippi, where they were promptly arrested for disobeying racial segregation rules. Despite U.S. Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/314866/Robert-F-Kennedy)’s plea for a “cooling-off” period, the [Freedom Rides](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/218576/Freedom-Rides) demonstrated that militant but nonviolent young activists could confront Southern segregation at its strongest points and pressure the federal government to intervene to protect the constitutional rights of African Americans. The Freedom Rides encouraged similar protests elsewhere against segregated transportation facilities and stimulated local campaigns in many Southern communities that had been untouched by the student sit-ins.

SCLC leaders worked with [Birmingham](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/66649/Birmingham), Alabama, minister [Fred Shuttlesworth](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1700460/Fred-Shuttlesworth) to launch a major campaign featuring confrontations between nonviolent demonstrators and the often brutal law-enforcement personnel directed by Birmingham’s police commissioner, Eugene T. (“Bull”) Connor. Televised confrontations between nonviolent protesters and vicious policemen with clubs and police dogs attracted Northern support and resulted in federal intervention to bring about a settlement that included civil rights concessions. King’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” of April 16, 1963, defended civil disobedience and warned that frustrated African Americans might turn to [black nationalism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/68078/black-nationalism), a development that he predicted would lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare. International news coverage of the Birmingham clashes prompted Pres. [John F. Kennedy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/314791/John-F-Kennedy) to introduce legislation that eventually became the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119351/Civil-Rights-Act).

Similar mass protests in dozens of other cities made white Americans more aware of the antiquated Jim Crow system, though black militancy also prompted a white “backlash.” Those mass protests culminated on August 28, 1963, in the [March on Washington](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/636444/March-on-Washington) for Jobs and Freedom, which attracted over 200,000 participants. King used his concluding “I Have a Dream” speech at the march as an opportunity to link black civil rights aspirations with traditional American political values. He insisted that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution comprised “a promissory note” guaranteeing all Americans “the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

While media attention concentrated on the urban demonstrations in Birmingham, the voter-registration campaign in rural Mississippi and Alabama, spearheaded by SNCC and groups under the auspices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), stimulated the emergence of resilient indigenous leadership and the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/385612/Mississippi-Freedom-Democratic-Party-MFDP) (MFDP). COFO director Robert Moses spearheaded a summer project in 1964 that brought together voting rights organizers and hundreds of Northern white volunteers. While the murders of three civil rights workers focused national attention on Mississippi, the MFDP, led by [Fannie Lou Hamer](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/253318/Fannie-Lou-Hamer), failed in its attempt to unseat the regular all-white delegation at the 1964 National Democratic Convention. During the following year, however, mass protests in the Alabama cities of [Selma](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/533717/Selma) and Montgomery led Pres. [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/305362/Lyndon-B-Johnson) to introduce legislation that became the [Voting Rights Act](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/633044/Voting-Rights-Act) of 1965.

**From black power to the assassination of** **[Martin Luther King](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/318311/Martin-Luther-King-Jr)**

The Selma-to-Montgomery march in March 1965 would be the last sustained Southern protest campaign that was able to secure widespread support among whites outside the region. The passage of voting rights legislation, the upsurge in Northern urban racial violence, and white resentment of black militancy lessened the effectiveness and popularity of nonviolent protests as a means of advancing African American interests. In addition, the growing militancy of black activists inspired by the then recently assassinated black nationalist [Malcolm X](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/359906/Malcolm-X) spawned an increasing determination among African Americans to achieve political power and cultural autonomy by building black-controlled institutions

When he accepted the 1964 [Nobel Peace Prize](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/416856/Nobel-Prize), King connected the African American struggle to the anticolonial struggles that had overcome European domination elsewhere in the world. In 1966 King launched a new campaign in Chicago against Northern slum conditions and segregation, but he soon faced a major challenge from “black power” proponents, such as SNCC chairman [Stokely Carmichael](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/96198/Stokely-Carmichael). This ideological conflict came to a head in June 1966 during a voting rights march through Mississippi following the wounding of [James Meredith](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/375972/James-Meredith), who had desegregated the [University of Mississippi](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/385587/University-of-Mississippi) in 1962. Carmichael’s use of the “[black power](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/912892/Black-Power)” slogan encapsulated the emerging notion of a freedom struggle seeking political, economic, and cultural objectives beyond narrowly defined civil rights reforms. By the late 1960s not only the NAACP and SCLC but even SNCC and CORE faced challenges from new militant organizations, such as the [Black Panther Party](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/68134/Black-Panther-Party), whose leaders argued that civil rights reforms were insufficient because they did not fully address the problems of poor and powerless blacks. They also dismissed nonviolent principles, often quoting Malcolm X’s imperative: “by any means necessary.” Questioning American citizenship and identity as goals for African Americans, black power proponents called instead for a global struggle for black national “self-determination” rather than merely for civil rights.

Although King criticized calls for black separatism and armed self-defense, he supported anticolonial movements and agreed that African Americans should seek compensatory government actions to redress historical injustices and end poverty. He criticized U.S. military intervention in the [Vietnam War](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/628478/Vietnam-War), which he characterized as a civil war, insisting that war was immoral and that the American government had wrongly opposed nationalist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In December 1967 he announced a [Poor People’s Campaign](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1499869/Poor-Peoples-Campaign) that intended to bring thousands of protesters to Washington, D.C., to lobby for an end to poverty.

After King’s assassination in April 1968, the Poor People’s Campaign floundered, and the [Black Panther Party](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/68134/Black-Panther-Party) and other black militant groups encountered intense government repression from local police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). In 1968 the [National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1683332/National-Advisory-Commission-on-Civil-Disorders) (also known as the Kerner Commission) concluded that the country, despite civil rights reforms, was moving “toward two societies one black, one white—separate and unequal.” By the time of the commission’s report, claims that black gains had resulted in “[reverse discrimination](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/500438/reverse-discrimination)” against whites were effectively used against significant new civil rights initiatives during the 1970s and 1980s

**Into the 21st century**

As was the case for formerly colonized people in countries that achieved independence during the period after World War II, the acquisition of citizenship rights by African Americans brought fewer gains for those who were poor than for those who possessed educational and class advantages. American civil rights legislation of the 1960s became the basis for [affirmative action](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/7740/affirmative-action)—programs that increased opportunities for many black students and workers as well as for women, disabled people, and other victims of discrimination. Increased participation in the American electoral system lessened black reliance on extralegal tactics. Some former civil rights activists, such as [John Lewis](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1690113/John-Lewis), [Andrew Young](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/653916/Andrew-Young), and [Jesse Jackson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/298824/Jesse-Jackson), launched careers in electoral politics. Black elected officials, including mayors, began to exert greater influence than either black power proponents or advocates of nonviolent civil rights protests. In 1969, believing that by speaking with a single voice they would have greater influence, 13 African American members of the U.S. [House of Representatives](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498496/House-of-Representatives) formed the Congressional Black Caucus “to promote the public welfare through legislation designed to meet the needs of millions of neglected citizens.” By the early 21st century that caucus numbered more than 40 members and could count among its achievements legislative initiatives involving minority business development, expansion of educational opportunities, and opposition to South Africa’s former [apartheid](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/29332/apartheid) system.

However, civil rights issues continued to stimulate protests, particularly when previous gains appeared to be threatened. Overall, the 20th-century struggle for civil rights produced an enduring transformation of the legal status of African Americans and other victims of discrimination. It also increased the responsibility of the government to enforce civil rights laws and the provisions of the Civil War-era constitutional amendments. Civil rights reforms did not, however, alter other determinants of the subordinate status of African Americans who remain in racially segregated communities where housing, public schools, and health care services are inferior. Like freedom struggles in Africa, the African American freedom struggle eliminated slavery and legally mandated forms of racial oppression, but the descendants of former slaves and colonized people generally remained in subordinate positions within the global capitalist economic order.

Still, in the early 21st century the ascent to the U.S. presidency of an African American, [Barack Obama](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/973560/Barack-Obama), seemed to reflect a transformation of American society with ramifications for the civil rights movement. [Jesse Jackson](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/298824/Jesse-Jackson) in his own landmark campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination in [1984](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1575886/United-States-presidential-election-of-1984) and [1988](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1575104/United-States-presidential-election-of-1988) had reached beyond the effort to mobilize African American voters and attempted to fashion a “Rainbow Coalition” of “red, yellow, brown, black, and white” Americans. Obama—whose father was a black Kenyan and mother a white American—presented a life story grounded in a search for a satisfactory racial identity. Ultimately, Obama’s approach to the world and, arguably, his appeal to many voters were transracial, grounded in a sophisticated understanding of the complex nature of racial identity that was no longer merely dichotomous (simply a matter of black or white). Given the deeply rooted racial conflicts of the American past, however, it is unlikely that Obama’s election signaled the start of a postracial era without divisive racial issues and controversies.

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http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119368/American-civil-rights-movement/288200/Into-the-21st-century