

# **Let Our Voices Be Heard: The 1963 Struggle for Voting Rights in Mississippi**

**Topic:** Voting rights for African Americans in Mississippi in the early 1960s

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject Area:** US History after World War II; US Government

**Time Required:** 2 hours

## **Goals/Rationale**

Prior to the enactment and enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans in various regions of the country, particularly in the South, were often denied the right to vote. Tactics resulting in disenfranchisement included threats of job loss, poll taxes, literacy tests, and the use of physical intimidation and violence. In this lesson plan, students consider some strategies for achieving the goal of equal voting rights for African Americans.

**Essential Question:** What can the federal government do to guarantee the rights of citizens?

## **Objectives**

Students will:

- analyze primary source documents.
- discuss the tactics suggested by civil rights organizations and the Kennedy administration for dealing with the disenfranchisement of African Americans in Mississippi in the early 1960s.
- consider the ramifications of each tactic.
- articulate their views on the pros and cons of each tactic.

## **Connections to Curricula (Standards)**

*National History Standards*

US History, Era 9

*Standard 3B:* The student understands the "New Frontier" and the "Great Society."

*Standard 4A:* The student understands the "Second Reconstruction" and its advancement of civil rights.

*Common Core State Standards*

*RH.11-12.1:* Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

*RH.11-12.2:* Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

*RH.11-12.3:* Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which

explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

*RH.11-12.6:* Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

*RH.11-12.8:* Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

*W.11-12.1:* Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

*SL.11-12.1:* Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

*SL.11.12.4:* Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

### *Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework*

*USII.T4 (4)* Analyze the origins, evolution, and goals of the African American Civil Rights Movement, researching the work of people such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin, Robert F. Kennedy, and institutions such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Congress of Racial Equality.

*USII.T5 (1)* Using primary sources such as campaign literature and debates, news articles/analyses, editorials, and television coverage, analyze the important policies and events that took place during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon.

## **Preparation**

### **Historical Background and Context**

Prior to the enactment and enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans in various regions of the country, particularly in the South, were often denied the right to vote. Tactics leading to disenfranchisement included threats of job loss, poll taxes, literacy tests, and the use of physical intimidation and violence. Civil rights groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Urban League sought to change these practices with the funding and coordination support of the Voter Education Project (VEP), a non-partisan, tax-exempt agency.

African Americans in Mississippi faced particularly daunting challenges in their efforts to obtain their constitutional right to vote. In a 1961 report, the US Commission on Civil Rights noted that in 69 counties, 37.7 percent of the voting age population was African American, but only 6.2 percent were registered. In 13 Mississippi counties, no African Americans were registered. Mississippi's Governor Ross Barnett was satisfied with the status quo.

Beginning in 1961, young men and women from SNCC targeted several Mississippi communities in voter registration drives, opening voter registration schools to encourage prospective voters and educate them on how to overcome the obstacles they would probably face. This non-violent movement led to beatings, shootings, imprisonment and even death of many civil rights workers, and men and women attempting to register. In LeFlore County, Mississippi authorities responded to the voter registration efforts by closing down the distribution of federal food surpluses to poor, mostly African-American citizens. Greenwood, one of the principal towns in LeFlore County, became a voter registration battleground.

The shooting of 20-year-old James Travis, a SNCC volunteer, in February 1963, provoked angry responses from civil rights leaders about lack of support from the federal government. Although President Kennedy had publicly noted the federal government's support of African-American voting rights, these leaders thought that more could be done. President Kennedy's stated goal of voting rights legislation (included in a larger civil rights bill) might be a possibility for the future, but, for the present, they felt that more direct action should be taken.

In one suggestion put forth by these groups, the federal government would cut off federal funds to the state of Mississippi. Another suggested strategy would have the federal government send federal marshals to each voter registration site to ensure that African Americans could register safely. Kennedy and his administration, however, thought that, for now, litigation through the federal courts would be the most effective method--until further legislation could be passed.

In this role play lesson, students will consider these three suggested strategies for federal involvement in voter registration.

## Materials

1. Reading: "To Vote in Mississippi" (included in this PDF)
2. Handouts for three role play groups: (1) United States Commission on Civil Rights Panel, (2) Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Panel, and (3) Kennedy Administration Panel (included in this PDF)
3. [September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#) in which Kennedy answers a question about the federal government's response to difficulties faced by prospective African-American voters in the South, and says the right to vote is "very basic" and deserves federal protection.
4. [September 21, 1962 letter from Charles McLaurin of SNCC to President Kennedy](#) discussing the efforts by whites in Ruleville, Mississippi to prevent African-American enfranchisement and asking why the federal government is not protecting citizens.
5. [October 3, 1962 telegram from Aaron E. Henry and Medgar Evers \(NAACP\) to President Kennedy](#) discussing the necessity of a strong civil rights bill and suggesting that the federal government place a federal marshal as registrar in every courthouse in the state.

6. [October 22, 1962 memo from Lee White to Burke Marshall](#) regarding the October 3rd telegram in which he asks Marshall how they might respond to the suggestion of stationing of federal marshals as voting registrars.
7. [October 25, 1962 memo from Burke Marshall to Lee White](#) regarding the October 22nd memo in which he dismisses the Henry and Evers telegram as "too outrageous to answer."
8. [March 7, 1963 telegram from Roy Wilkins \(NAACP\) to President Kennedy](#) in which he urges federal protection for voter registration efforts and the denial of federal assistance to Mississippi until state authorities cease interfering with voter registration.
9. [March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#) expressing alarm at events in Mississippi and requesting federal protection of citizens and the withholding of federal funds from the state
10. [April 3, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#) in which he responds to a question about what the Justice Department can do to help voter registration efforts in Greenwood, Mississippi by focusing on court actions and the need for a voting bill.
11. [April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the president](#) regarding the resolution of the Civil Rights Commission in which he goes, point by point, through the March 30th resolution providing an answer to every charge and recommendation.
12. [April 19, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Dr. Hannah of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#) responding to the Commission's report with a description of actions taken by the federal government in the courts, and reasons why the federal government would not withhold funds from Mississippi.
13. [April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#) in which he is asked about the US Commission on Civil Rights' report, and he explains the actions being taken by the federal government and why it would not withhold funds from Mississippi.

## Procedure

1. For Homework - Provide students with handout "To Vote in Mississippi" and ask them to answer the "Questions to Consider."
2. In class the next day, discuss the various methods used to disenfranchise African Americans in the early 1960s and the "Questions to Consider."
3. Tell students that they will consider three suggested tactics for federal involvement in Mississippi voter registration in a role play exercise. Students will be assigned to a panel representing people from SNCC, the US Commission on Civil Rights, or the Kennedy administration with one of three tactics for which they must advocate. They will use primary source documents and work in small groups to make an argument as to the merits of their tactic. They will then present their reasoning to the larger class.
4. Split students into groups of 5-7 for each of panels with their specific tactic:
  - Group 1 - US Commission on Civil Rights Panel: Denying federal money to Mississippi.

- Group 2 - SNCC Panel: Assigning a federal marshal or marshals in every registrar's office.
  - Group 3 - Kennedy Administration Panel: Using the federal courts to litigate when cases of voter discrimination are found.
5. Provide students in each group with a handout on their role and 6-7 primary sources and have them read through and discuss the materials to prepare for the role play exercise.

**Group 1 - US Commission on Civil Rights: Denying federal money to Mississippi**

1. [September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)
2. [March 7, 1963 telegram from Roy Wilkins \(NAACP\) to President Kennedy](#)
3. [March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#)
4. [April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the president](#)
5. [April 19, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Dr. Hannah of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#)
6. [April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)

**Group 2 - SNCC: Assigning Federal Marshals in every Registrar's Office**

1. [September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)
2. [September 21, 1962 letter from Charles McLaurin of SNCC to President Kennedy](#)
3. [October 3, 1962 telegram from Aaron E. Henry and Medgar Evers \(NAACP\) to President Kennedy](#)
4. [October 22, 1962 memo from Lee White to Burke Marshall regarding the October 3rd telegram](#)
5. [October 25, 1962 memo from Burke Marshall to Lee White regarding the October 22nd memo](#)
6. [March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#)
7. [April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)

**Group 3 - Kennedy administration: Using the federal courts to litigate when cases of voter discrimination are found.**

1. [September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)
2. [March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#)
3. [April 3, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)
4. [April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the president](#)
5. [April 19, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Dr. Hannah of the US Commission on Civil Rights](#)
6. [April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)

During the role play, each panel must make an argument as to why their tactic is superior. They will have 5-10 minutes for their arguments. After each panel has explained their reasoning to the others, the class will have a larger discussion about the pros and cons of each tactic for the civil rights groups and for the Kennedy administration.

## Assessment

For homework, students will write a two-page paper articulating their own view as to the merits and drawbacks of each option.

## Extension

Have students research the steps the federal government took (and did not take) in Greenwood, Mississippi in the spring of 1963 to combat segregationists' attempts to disenfranchise African Americans, by reviewing the following documents on our website and doing further research:

1. [April 3, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference](#)
2. [April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the president](#) regarding the resolution of the Civil Rights Commission

Teachers should note the following government actions:

- In late 1962, when LeFlore County officials stopped the distribution of surplus food, SNCC began a campaign to ship in food, clothing and medicine to needy families. Additionally, the Department of Agriculture advised LeFlore County officials that they must resume distribution of surplus food or the federal government would do so directly. The county reestablished food distribution in March 1963 after the Department of Agriculture agreed to pay for its administrative costs which were usually the responsibility of the county.
- On March 30, 1963, the Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the city of Greenwood, and pending the court action, on March 31, asked for a temporary restraining order against local officials who were preventing voter registration and demanded the release of eight imprisoned voter registration workers. The civil rights workers were released, but a few days later, the Justice Department made a deal with local officials, agreeing to drop the restraining order in return for an ambiguous agreement that local officials would allow African Americans to register and provide a bus to take African Americans from the VEP building to the courthouse so they would not march there.

## To Vote in Mississippi

Prior to the enactment and enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans in various regions of the country, particularly in the South, were often denied the right to vote. Tactics leading to disenfranchisement included threats of job loss, poll taxes, literacy tests, and the use of physical intimidation and violence. Civil rights groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Urban League sought to change these practices with the funding and coordination support of the Voter Education Project (VEP), a non-partisan, tax exempt-agency.

African Americans in Mississippi faced particularly daunting challenges in their efforts to obtain their constitutional right to vote. In a 1961 report, the US Commission on Civil Rights noted that in 69 counties, 37.7 percent of the voting age population was African American, but only 6.2 percent were registered. In 13 Mississippi counties, no African Americans were registered. Mississippi's Governor Ross Barnett was satisfied with the status quo.

Beginning in 1961, young men and women from SNCC targeted several Mississippi communities in voter registration drives, opening voter registration schools to encourage prospective voters and educate them on how to overcome the obstacles they would probably face. This nonviolent movement led to beatings, shootings, imprisonment and sometimes death of many civil rights workers, and men and women attempting to register. In LeFlore County, Mississippi authorities responded to voter registration efforts by closing down distribution of federal food surpluses to poor, mostly African-American citizens. Greenwood, one of the principal towns in LeFlore County, became a voter registration battleground.

The shooting of 20-year-old James Travis, a SNCC volunteer, in February 1963, provoked angry responses from civil rights leaders about the lack of support from the federal government. Although President Kennedy had publicly noted the federal government's support of African-American voting rights, these leaders thought that more could be done. President Kennedy's stated goal of voting rights legislation (included in a larger civil rights bill)

might be a possibility for the future, but, for the present, they felt that more direct action should be taken.

In one suggestion put forth by these groups, the federal government would cut off federal funds to the state of Mississippi. Another suggested strategy would have the federal government send federal marshals to each voter registration site to ensure that African Americans could register safely. Kennedy and his administration, however, thought that, for now, litigation through the federal courts would be the most effective method—until further legislation could be passed.

Questions to consider:

1. Why might some civil rights leaders and the Kennedy administration have considered voting rights one of the most important rights for African Americans?
2. How might the shooting of James Travis have provoked a confrontation between civil rights leaders, Mississippi state leaders, and the federal government?
3. Would you vote if you felt your life or livelihood was threatened? Why or why not?

## To Vote in Mississippi

### Group One: United States Commission on Civil Rights Panel

Your organization, the United States Commission on Civil Rights, is an independent commission of the federal government, first created in 1957 under President Eisenhower. The task of your commission is to investigate, report and make recommendations regarding civil rights issues. Your members currently include John A. Hannah, Chairman (President of Michigan State University from 1941-1969), Robert G. Storey, Vice Chairman (Dean of Southern Methodist University School of Law from 1947-1959 and founder and President of the Southwestern Legal Foundation from 1947 to 1972), Erwin N. Griswold (Dean of Harvard Law School from 1946-1967), Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh (President of Notre Dame from 1952-1987), Robert S. Rankin (Professor of Political Science from Duke University), and Spottswood W. Robinson III (Civil Rights Lawyer and Dean of Howard University Law School from 1960-1964).

Your organization has been aware of the efforts by civil rights organization such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to increase voter registration of African Americans in Mississippi. The violence that has ensued in the attempt to increase voter registration has alarmed your colleagues. One suggestion that has seemed reasonable and necessary to your colleagues has been for the federal government to deny federal money to the state of Mississippi until such time as the unconstitutional practices that have disenfranchised African American ends.

It is now late spring in 1963. You want to get as many African-American voters registered as possible before the 1964 election. Your panel's task is to consider how to persuade others of the importance of withholding federal funds to Mississippi. You will use the following documents to help craft an argument:

1. September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference
2. March 7, 1963 telegram from Roy Wilkins (NAACP) to President Kennedy
3. March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights
4. April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the President
5. April 19, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Dr. Hannah of the US Commission on Civil Rights
6. April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference

## To Vote in Mississippi

### Group Two: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Panel

Your organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), formed by a group of young civil rights activists in April 1960, has been committed to increasing voter registration of African Americans in Mississippi. The violence that has ensued in the attempt to increase voter registration has shaken your colleagues, and many, including Charles McLaurin, have written to the president demanding physical protection for voter registration efforts. One suggestion that has seemed reasonable and necessary to your colleagues has been for the federal government to provide a federal marshal in every location in Mississippi where voters are registered.

It is now late spring in 1963. You want to get as many African-American voters registered as possible before the 1964 presidential election. Your panel's task is to consider how to persuade others of the importance of posting federal marshals at voter registration sites. You will use the following documents to help craft an argument:

1. September 13, 1962 excerpt from press conference of President Kennedy.
2. September 21, 1962 letter from Charles McLaurin of SNCC to JFK.
3. October 3, 1962 telegram from Aaron E. Henry and Medgar Evers (NAACP) to JFK.

(Note: On October 1, 1962, the federal government was forced to send thousands of troops to Oxford, Mississippi to end the rioting that ensued when James Meredith, an African American Air Force veteran, attempted to register as a student at the all-white University of Mississippi. During the rioting, two men were killed and hundreds were wounded. Prior to Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi, another African American, Clyde Kennard, attempted to enroll in the all-white Mississippi Southern College and was jailed on trumped up charges. Herbert Lee, an African American farmer who had helped register voters, was shot dead by a member of the Mississippi State Legislature in September 1961.)

4. October 22, 1962 memo from Lee White to Burke Marshall regarding the October 3<sup>rd</sup> telegram.
5. October 25, 1962 memo from Burke Marshall to Lee White regarding the October 22<sup>nd</sup> memo.
6. March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights
7. April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference

## To Vote in Mississippi

### Group Three: Kennedy Administration Panel

Since the beginning of his presidency, John F. Kennedy has noted that the right to vote is a basic right for all citizens, and early in 1963 he proposed voting rights legislation--incorporated in a larger civil rights bill. He and his staff have been aware of efforts by Mississippi officials to prevent African Americans from fulfilling their basic right. It has been President Kennedy's hope, however, that until legislation can be passed, that voter registration difficulties mainly be resolved through the Attorney General's office -- using the courts and litigation to ensure that all Americans can vote. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall, and Lee C. White, JFK's Assistant Special Counsel to the President, among others, have been actively involved in handling issues related to voter registration.

As members of Kennedy's administration, you have been aware of the efforts by civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to increase voter registration of African Americans in Mississippi. The violence that has ensued in the attempt to increase voter registration has led to an outpouring of telegrams and letters to your colleagues requesting federal action.

It is now late spring in 1963. You want to be true to JFK's words that African Americans will not be disenfranchised. At the same time, you do not want to hamper the efforts of your administration to pass far-reaching civil rights legislation which might occur if the administration is seen as overreaching its powers. Your panel's task is to consider how to persuade others of the importance of handling disenfranchisement through the federal courts until a comprehensive civil rights bill is passed. You will use the following documents to help craft an argument:

1. September 13, 1962 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference
2. March 30, 1963 Resolution of the US Commission on Civil Rights
3. April 3, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference
4. April 10, 1963 memo from Lee White to the President regarding the Civil Rights Commission Resolution
5. April 19, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Dr. Hannah of the US Commission on Civil Rights
6. April 24, 1963 excerpt from President Kennedy's press conference