

Strategies for Support: JFK and the Civil Rights Act of 1963

Topic: The Civil Rights Act of 1963

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: US History after World War II – History and Government

Time Required: 1-2 hours

Goal/Rationale

Although the office of the presidency holds considerable power, the president alone cannot fulfill his agenda without significant support from the legislative branch of government and the American people. When President Kennedy proposed civil rights legislation in 1963, he faced substantial opposition in Congress and from a large segment of Americans. In this lesson plan, students will consider how a president can generate support for one of his legislative initiatives and help a bill become a law, by investigating the steps President Kennedy took in attempting to turn his June 1963 civil rights proposal into meaningful legislation.

Essential Question: What tools does a president have to support passage of his proposed legislation?

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.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.9-10.8: Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims.

W.9-10.1 and 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.

W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

SL.9-10.1 and 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 grades 9–10 and 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and

logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

USH.T4 - Defending democracy: the Cold War and civil rights at home

GOV.T1 - Foundations of government in the United States

Objectives

Students will:

- describe and analyze the contents of the Civil Rights Bill of 1963.
- analyze primary sources.
- explain methods used by President Kennedy to garner support for his proposed civil rights legislation.

Materials

1. [“Important Background Facts on the Omnibus Civil Rights Act of 1963”](#) from the Washington State Democratic Committee, which outlines the major provisions of the bill, explains which provisions will be most controversial, assesses whether the bill will pass, and explains the future steps for the bill (also included with downloadable lesson plan).
2. [President Kennedy’s June 11, 1963 Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights](#), in which he calls civil rights not just a constitutional and legal issue, but a moral one as well.
3. [Time-Life Civil Rights “Spots” Project](#), created in response to Kennedy’s June 11th speech, in which celebrities and officials explain the importance of civil rights for a television audience and stress the role of ordinary Americans in creating change.
4. [Undated Record of Presidential Meetings with Leadership Groups](#), which lists groups (business, religious, labor, women, etc.) President Kennedy met with to discuss civil rights from May 29 through July 9, 1963.
5. [June 4, 1963 Meeting of the President with Business Executives](#), which provides an excerpt of the transcript from the meeting discussing voluntary desegregation of commercial establishments.
6. [Undated memo from Willard Wirtz to President Kennedy for use in a June 13, 1963 meeting with union leaders](#), in which he discusses the progress made by unions, the problems that still exist, and what the unions can do to help (i.e., prevent discrimination in apprenticeship and training programs, support the enforcement of the Executive Order that prohibits racial discrimination in hiring employees for government jobs or contract work, desegregate international unions.)
7. [June 17, 1963 Meeting of the President with Religious Leaders](#), which provides an excerpt of transcript from the meeting in which President Kennedy states his hope that the clergy will emphasize the moral position of racial equality and discusses with the clergymen how they can help local communities desegregate public establishments such as theaters, hotels and restaurants.
8. [June 19, 1963 John F. Kennedy’s “Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights and Job Opportunities,”](#) in which he discusses the need for his proposed comprehensive legislation (voting rights, public accommodations, fair employment practices).
9. [October 23, 1963 tape recording of a meeting between President Kennedy and some members of the Judiciary Committee](#), in which they discuss the status of the civil rights bill and changes to the bill that would make it more likely to meet bipartisan requirements.

Historical Background and Context

When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, African Americans throughout much of the South were denied the right to vote, barred from public facilities, subjected to insults and violence, and could not expect justice from the courts. In the North, Black Americans also faced discrimination in housing, employment, education, and many other areas. But the civil rights movement had made important progress, and change was on the way.

Although the election of 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon was very close, across the nation more than 70 percent of African Americans voted for Kennedy. These votes provided the winning edge in several key states. When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, African Americans had high expectations for the new administration.

But Kennedy's narrow election victory and small working margin in Congress left him cautious. He was reluctant to lose southern support for legislation on many fronts by pushing too hard on civil rights legislation. Instead, he appointed unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high-level positions in the administration and strengthened the Civil Rights Commission. He spoke out in favor of school desegregation and praised a number of cities for integrating their schools. He used executive orders to create the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and prevent racial discrimination in the hiring of federal employees and contractors; and to forbid discrimination in the sale or lease of federally funded housing. Attorney General Robert Kennedy turned his attention to voting rights, initiating five times the number of suits brought during the previous administration. On February 28, 1963, Kennedy submitted a Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights in which he asked Congress to enact legislation which included limited civil rights measures such as strengthening voting rights laws and providing assistance for schools that were voluntarily desegregating. Congress did not act on this proposal.

By the spring of 1963 Kennedy's attention became increasingly focused on civil rights. His evolution to a greater involvement in civil rights was spurred, in large measure, by the growing number and size of civil rights demonstrations, and the violent backlash from segregationists. The 1963 Birmingham Campaign in Alabama made national news with images of children attacked by dogs and blasted with fire hoses as more than 1,000 were arrested. The Kennedy administration was compelled to take action.

When it became clear that Governor George Wallace would stand at the doorway of the University of Alabama's registration building on June 11, 1963 to prevent the registration of two African American college students, President Kennedy realized that, with the nation focused on civil rights, the timing was right to speak to the nation about the need for civil rights legislation. In his speech, he called civil rights not just a constitutional and legal issue, but a moral one as well. On June 19, 1963 he submitted a comprehensive bill for the Civil Rights Act of 1963 to Congress.

Procedure

1. In class, review the context of the 1963 proposed civil rights bill.
2. For homework, have students read the document "Important Background Facts on the Omnibus Civil Rights Act of 1963" from the Washington State Democratic Committee. Have them pick one aspect of the bill (i.e. voting, school desegregation, fair employment opportunities, desegregation of privately owned establishments, etc.) and write a one-page essay about why they feel this particular aspect of the bill is especially important.

3. The next day, in class, go over the homework responses of the students. Ask students from what groups the president would want to enlist support for his civil rights bill. Then, brainstorm with students how the President might generate support for his civil rights agenda from the American people and Congress.

- How might he gain support from the general public?
- How might he gain support from special interest groups? (i.e., business leaders)
- How might he gain support from U.S. senators and U.S. representatives?

[Students should be reminded of the various tools the president might have at his disposal to address these audiences such as televised speeches, the use of media for outreach through public service announcements, meetings with interest groups, meetings with political leaders and congressional committee members, etc.]

4. Assign each student a particular audience from the three bullet points noted above, and have them work in small groups with other students assigned to their audience. Have the groups go to [*The Bill chapter in the 1963: The Struggle for Civil Rights microsite*](#) and pick one primary source that represents one kind of strategy for their audience and discuss with each other how it might help the president get his civil rights legislation passed. Tell them they should be prepared to discuss their findings with the entire class.

Provide them with this list of possible primary sources:

Gaining support of the general public

- [President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights](#)
- [Time-Life Civil Rights "Spots" Project](#)

Gaining special interest groups' support (businessmen, religious leaders, etc.)

- [Undated memo from Willard Wirtz to President Kennedy for use in a June 13, 1963 meeting with union leaders](#) (Students can refer to this, but cannot use this as their sole primary source for their presentation)
- [June 4, 1963 Meeting of the President with Business Executives](#)
- [June 17, 1963 Meeting of the President with Religious Leaders](#)

Gaining support from Congress

- [June 19, 1963 John F. Kennedy's "Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights and Job Opportunities"](#)
- [October 23, 1963 tape recording of a meeting between President Kennedy and some members of the Judiciary Committee](#)

[For the October 23, 1963 tape recording noted above, have students focus on the president's remarks (Keeping the Bill Alive, Pt. 2). Les Arends was the minority whip for Republicans. Prior to the excerpt on our website, he had mentioned that he believed some Republicans would be uneasy about supporting the civil rights bill without an assurance that Democrats supported it. In the excerpt, Kennedy responds to concerns over which Party would receive the most criticism over supporting a modified civil rights bill. Most references made by Kennedy to "they" and "them" are to Republicans in Congress.]

Here is a transcription of President Kennedy's remarks:

I think you'd have difficulties, if the mood is as Les has just described, selling them [Republicans] anything, unless they understood that the administration, the President, and the Democrats were signed off. Then you were giving them [Republicans] a proposition, should we go or shan't we go? If you [Republicans] go in and say well maybe the President is going to try to sell the Democrats if we agree, then the initiative has to be taken in a sense by the Republicans, rather than by the Democrats. And then they'll say, "Hell, let the Democrats take the heat." I would think you'd sell it to them [Republicans] better, if you understood that what the Democrats were ready to go... Therefore, I would say, and I think we could get the Democrats to go, once we get an understanding of what kind of a bill. And I'm not... that's why I want to know what it is on the four or five critical points, which I think we're in general agreement on, and which I'm sure you and Nick [Deputy Attorney General Katzenbach] can get to complete agreement in a half hour. Then I can say to the Democrats, "Here's the best we can do, and my judgment is, we ought to try to do it." Then if I can get them [the Democrats] to agree, the numbers it requires, I'm confident we can get the Republicans."

5. Have students report to the entire class about President Kennedy's various methods for gaining support for his bill, as discussed in their small groups (Step 4).

Assessment

For homework, have each student write a one-page essay that includes a description of the primary source they studied in their small group and their own explanation of how it might help the president get his civil rights legislation passed.

Note for students that although the comprehensive civil rights bill cleared several hurdles in Congress in the fall of 1963 and won the endorsement of House and Senate Republican leaders, it was not passed before November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated.

In his last public statement about the bill, President Kennedy was asked two questions about the civil rights bill during a press conference on November 14, 1963 (available as video on our website):

“QUESTION: Mr. President, it now seems unlikely that you will get either your tax bill or your civil rights bill in this session of Congress. Does that disturb you?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that the longer the delay, I think-- yes, I think it is unfortunate. The fact of the matter is that both these bills should be passed. The tax bill has been before the Congress for nearly a year. The civil rights has been there for a much shorter time. It didn't go up until June. I am hopeful that the House will certainly act on that in the next month, maybe sooner. The tax bill hearings have been quite voluminous. It would seem to me that it might be possible to end those hearings and bring the matter to the Floor of the Senate before the end of the year. Otherwise, the civil rights bill will come over after the first of the year and there may be a very long debate..."

“QUESTION: Mr. President, I think a few minutes ago you said it would be unfortunate if the tax bill and the civil rights bill don't get through. You just said also it is the worst attack on the foreign aid bill since its inception. Several appropriations bills are still hung up in Congress, the first time in history this late. What has happened on Capitol Hill?

THE PRESIDENT: They are all interrelated. I think there is some delay because of civil rights. That has had an effect upon the passage of appropriations bills. There is not any question. On the other hand, of course, what we are talking about in both the civil rights bill and the tax bill are very complicated and important pieces of legislation, in fact more significant in their own way than legislation which has been sent up there for a decade. My judgment is that by the time this Congress goes home in the sense of next summer that in the fields of education, mental health, taxes, civil rights, this is going to be a record that is going to be-- however dark it looks now, I think that 'Westward look the land is bright,' and I think by next summer it may be."

The bill was left in the hands of Lyndon B. Johnson. Before becoming vice president, Johnson had served more than two decades in Congress as a congressman and senator from Texas. He used his connections with southern white congressional leaders and the outpouring of emotion after the president's assassination to pass the Civil Rights.

Provisions of the legislation included: (1) protecting African Americans against discrimination in voter qualification tests; (2) outlawing discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce; (3) authorizing the US Attorney General's Office to file legal suits to enforce desegregation in public schools; (4) authorizing the withdrawal of federal funds from programs practicing discrimination; and (5) outlawing discrimination in employment in any business exceeding 25 people and creating an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to review complaints.

Passed on July 2, 1964, the Civil Rights Act was a crucial step in achieving the civil rights movement's initial goal: full legal equality.

Extensions

Have students research a current, controversial bill that the president submitted for legislation and consider how the president has tried to gain support of the public, special interest groups, and Congress. They can present their work in a format of their choosing.

Have students select a legislative cause at the national level and consider, as president, what they might do to enlist support for it. This could take the form of a multimedia presentation to the class, an essay, or an exhibit.