

Name _____ Date _____

Voting Rights Act & Selma March

“And We Shall Overcome”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Imagine you're an African-American man living in the South before 1965. Since 1870, you've had a constitutional right to vote, but your state and county have disenfranchised you, meaning they've denied you the right to vote or made it very difficult. Voter registration is only open twice a month. To register, you have to pass a literacy test. If you pass, there are other hurdles. You have to pay a poll tax, a fee for registering to vote. Grandfather clauses made these unfair voting practices only apply to African Americans. Grandfather clauses stated that if you, your father or your grandfather voted before 1867, you were allowed to vote without a literacy test or poll tax. Before 1867, only white men were allowed to vote, so white men who were illiterate or poor didn't have to worry about reading tests or poll taxes. There were other obstacles as well. Black people often lived far from polling places—the place you must go to vote. If they did manage to get to their polling place, white voters often harassed and intimidated them. These difficulties were a large part of why only 3% of eligible black voters were registered in the South in 1940.

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2. The Ku Klux Klan, or KKK, is a violent hate group that still exists today. They are white supremacists, people who believe that white people are superior to other races, and that non-whites must be oppressed. The KKK formed after the Civil War to try to keep white people in control in the US. In the 1950s and 1960s, the KKK fought civil rights with violence. They did not believe that African Americans deserved the same rights as white people, including the right to vote.

The White Citizens' Council was another white supremacist group. They formed in the 1950s and spread through the South. Their goal was to keep schools segregated and enforce other forms of discrimination. Members of this group were often wealthy business leaders. In addition to violence, they used their money and power to intimidate African Americans. Their slogan was a single word challenge to integration: "Never!" Sheriff Jim Clark, who played a key role in the Selma marches, used to wear a "Never!" button on his sheriff's uniform.

3. Selma is a major city in Dallas County, Alabama. In 1961, 15,000 African Americans were eligible to vote in Dallas County, but only 130, less than 1%, had registered. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) was a group formed in 1920 to increase the number of African American voters. In 1963, the DCVL began working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The SNCC was a powerful civil rights group created by college students at Shaw University. Together, the SNCC and the DCVL built a team of volunteers who knocked on doors and encouraged people to register. They also held voter education classes and registration events. Sheriff Jim Clark responded to their activities with violence and arrests. Near the end of 1964, the DCVL asked another civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), to join them. Members of the SCLC came to Selma with their president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. By January 1965, civil rights leaders like Dr. King, Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis and Hosea Williams were working together, and Selma had become the center of the voting rights movement.

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4. In February 1965, a state trooper in Alabama shot and killed civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson. In response, the SCLC called for a peaceful march to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. On March 7, 600 marchers left Selma and headed toward Montgomery, 54 miles away. They were met by state troopers almost immediately, along with Sheriff Clark and his deputies. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the officers began beating people and firing tear gas. Fifty-six people were brought to the hospital. John Lewis, a leader of the SNCC, was beaten so badly his skull was fractured. Television crews captured the scene, and footage was shown on the news. The day became known as "Bloody Sunday." The violence—and the media coverage of it—brought voting rights and issues of equality to the nation's attention. Many people wanted President Lyndon B. Johnson to protect the marchers by sending in federal troops. John Lewis was quoted in the New York Times saying, "I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam—I don't see how he can send troops to the Congo—I don't see how he can send troops to Africa and can't send troops to Selma."

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5. Two days after Bloody Sunday, a second march began. 2,000 marchers made it across the bridge, but they were met by officers trying to prevent them from leaving Selma. Dr. King encouraged the crowd to kneel and pray before turning around. This event became known as "Turnaround Tuesday." On March 15, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress that was broadcast on television. He spoke of the importance of voting, the bravery of the Selma marchers and the need to protect voting rights. He proposed an act that would guarantee African Americans the right to vote, a right they legally had but had been denied. The legislation he called for would soon become the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). President Johnson told Congress, "[I]t is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice." He added, "And we shall overcome." On March 17, the protesters were granted federal protection for a third march. The US Army and Alabama National Guard lined the roads as 3,200 people set out for Montgomery. The march lasted five days and grew along the way. On March 21, 25,000 people arrived in Montgomery and listened to Dr. King speak.

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6. The Voting Rights Act was signed on August 6, 1965. It banned literacy tests and other policies that disenfranchised voters. It contained general provisions that applied to the entire country and special provisions that applied to certain states. Under the special provisions, the US Department of Justice and federal courts had the power to monitor places that had a history of violations and denying people their legal right to vote. These places had to receive approval by the federal government before changing their voting procedures. This special provision was described in Section 5 of the VRA. The places were identified by a specific formula outlined in Section 4. The VRA had an immediate effect on voter registration. Across the South, 250,000 new black voters had registered by the end of the year. Black voter turnout, the percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots in elections, skyrocketed. But challenges to African Americans' right to vote hadn't ended. Between 1965 and 2013, the Department of Justice prevented over 3,000 discriminatory changes to voting procedures. Recognizing the continued need to protect voting rights, Congress extended the Voting Rights Act for five years in 1970, for seven years in 1975 and for 25 years in 1982 and 2006.

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7. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which outlined a formula for determining preclearance, was unconstitutional. They said that the formula had been created a long time ago and didn't reflect current conditions in the areas it covered, so some places were still forced to seek preclearance when they shouldn't be. Section 5 remains, but without Section 4, it cannot be enforced. Some people believe that the preclearance is no longer necessary because they believe racial minorities don't face challenges to voting today. Others disagree. They fear that states will again try to disenfranchise black voters. After the 2013 ruling, Texas and North Carolina, which used to need preclearance, enacted new voting laws. Some say these laws target racial minorities and make it harder for them to vote, and there are lawsuits challenging new voting laws in these and other states. The status of voting rights in the US is still changing. The 2016 presidential election was the first election in almost 50 years that took place under the amended version of the Voting Rights Act, and scholars are studying minority voter turnout to see if it was affected by new voting laws or regulations.

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