

Nina Prouty

Period 2

US History

"The federal government dominated the civil rights movement from 1945-1960." How far do you agree?

Yes: Presidential

Eisenhower passing the first legislation since Reconstruction

Truman getting the army desegregated

Sending federal troops into Little Rock

No: Federal legislation was not effective/contradictory (Southern Manifesto) and organizations had to work to get around it

Eisenhower never acknowledged/endorsed Brown v. Board of Education

NAACP 30 years of attempted litigation to prove Plessy v. Ferguson as unconstitutional

Eisenhower bills watered down; Truman desegregation dragged feet; neither presidents were impassioned about the cause

Yes: Supreme Court

Brown v. Board of Education

Brown II

Artherine Lucy's case

*Made the civil rights activists feel as if they had a friend in the federal government

No: Individual acts of courage

Emmett Till's mother Mamie Till

Rosa Parks

MLK

In the late ‘40s and ‘50s, the civil rights movement was burgeoning into a successful, nationwide protest for equality, and I mostly do not agree that it was driven by the federal government.

Initially, the federal government can be seen as the driver of the civil rights movement because of legislation that was put into place by Truman and Eisenhower. In the early stages of his second term as president, Harry S. Truman signed an executive order that would desegregate the military, and he passed liberal legislation to help disenfranchised people (including African Americans) find affordable housing. This was integral in reshaping the federal government’s approach to civil rights; allowing black people to serve in the same capacity as white people in our armed forces is an important show of trust in that community, since the armed forces had become nationally revered after WWII. By passing this executive order, it showed African Americans that their president recognized their sacrifice and wanted to ensure that they received the same treatment while serving a country that historically oppressed them. Additionally, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction was passed under the Eisenhower administration in 1957 and was followed by another 1960s bill. Some main points of these bills were that they created a committee that would investigate civil rights violations and allowed the attorney general to investigate these, respectively. This demonstrates that the federal government reinvigorated the civil rights movement; its passage of these two acts through Congress rather than just an executive order showed civil rights activists that it was possible to get legislation benefiting them through the “hard way” and that more change was possible. Eisenhower sending in one of the Army’s airborne divisions to protect integration efforts in Little Rock had a similar effect: the federal government was willing to take steps to protect them, even if under the threat of violence otherwise.

The federal government, namely the Supreme Court, did a lot to spur the civil rights movement and can be called a driver of it. In 1952, the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall brought a compilation of 5 cases to the Supreme Court, headed by Oliver Brown. The chief justice, appointed by Eisenhower to be a conservative force, held up the case from being deliberated on for two years in order to ensure that all members would vote in favor of it. By creating a unanimous ruling, not only did this ensure segregation was firmly unconstitutional, but it repaired the damage done by the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the 1890s that stated separate facilities were allowed as long as they remained equal. This demonstrates that the court was so in favor of civil rights that it waited 2 years to ensure segregation was firmly unconstitutional; this show of faith on the federal government’s part was unparalleled and reminiscent of the times following the Civil War. It was extremely beneficial to the morale of civil rights activists who had been fighting to get major steps forwards since the 1930s. The most important part of this ruling was that it showed African Americans that they had “a friend in the federal government”. Another case, Artherine Lucy’s, where she wanted to enroll in the University of Alabama but was not allowed to because of her race and the Supreme Court found this unconstitutional, further supported the movement due to careful rulings by the court. Therefore, the Supreme Court’s assistance in the civil rights movement shows that the federal government did drive the movement.

Conversely, the federal government was not the driver of the civil rights movement because the legislation that was passed was ineffectual and the NAACP and other organizations had to fight to sidestep past court decisions and legislations that the government did nothing to condemn. For example, Harry Truman’s desegregation of the army was a good theoretical

mandate, but the head of the army, Dwight D. Eisenhower himself, dragged his feet in actually carrying through with it, and the army remained segregated long after the order was put in. Additionally, both bills that Eisenhower signed about civil rights were extremely watered down due to the Republican Congress and were decent in theory, but in reality did very little. This demonstrates that the tangible effect that federal legislation had was virtually nonexistent; the fact that Congress had to battle to pass even a small amount of civil rights legislation, having to strip away most of the substance of the bill, could have had an opposite effect on the civil rights activists, since it showed that many people in their government were actively campaigning against them. Similarly, the man that stopped their in-service family members from integrating into the main forces of the army was now president, so it may be questioned whether African Americans doubted the sincerity of their government's apparent concern for them. On the same note, Howard Smith of Virginia delivered the Southern Manifesto, which prompted Southern states, where the worst of the segregation was occurring, to resist this offense to the "founding principles" of the United States. This reinforces the claim that some in government were actively working against the civil rights movement. *Brown v. Board of Education* may have been integral to the civil rights movement, but the effects that it had were very limited directly following its passage, even prompting a second decision (*Brown II*) to mandate desegregation with "all deliberate speed". While this does show that the Supreme Court was in favor of civil rights, it also caused several riots, including the one at Little Rock that required the Army to deescalate. So, due to the ineffectiveness of most legislation and court rulings of the time, the federal government cannot be said to have been the primary driver of the civil rights movement.

Furthermore, the federal government was not the main driver of the civil rights movement because most positive effects came from grassroots organizations and individual acts of courage. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat among a row of others that were forced to move due to a white man wanting to sit away from any Black people in 1955. Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till, published photos of her dead, maimed son for the world to see the cruelties Black people face on an everyday basis. The Little Rock Nine endured terrible conditions at school in order to push forwards the integration movement. Each of these acts of courage sparked even bigger movements, such as the 11-month-long Montgomery Bus Boycott in response to Rosa Parks's arrest, and the global condemnation of what happened in Mississippi following Emmett Till's death. These acts of courage were much more effective in mobilizing civil rights activists: they were unambiguous and inspirational, much unlike the watered-down and reluctant bills passed in Congress. Without brave showings such as these, the civil rights movement very well may have sputtered out since states and whites were continuing to spew hatred in activists' faces. Additionally, organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by the eloquent and impassioned Martin Luther King Jr., and the NAACP were able to create long lived movements that drove the civil rights movement forwards: the Montgomery Bus Boycott was originally only supposed to be a day long, but it was sustained by meetings in Baptists churches and fiery speeches by the leader of the SCLC. The NAACP fought for 30 years through litigation to achieve progress in civil rights, and while it was nowhere near as flashy as the nonviolent demonstrations of the SCLC and similar organizations, it still showed black people that there were people like Thurgood Marshall and Daisy Bates, the president of the NAACP chapter in Arkansas that assisted the Little Rock Nine, that were fighting for them. As such, it can be drawn that individuals and private organizations were the true drivers of the civil rights movement, not the federal government.

Ultimately, between the ineffectual legislation and reluctance by leaders, the federal government cannot be said to have been the driver of the civil rights movement. However, it was certainly made possible by it. The federal government did not do very much in the scheme of things—most of its legislation was ineffective and even the court cases were often ignored by states—but what it did do gave grassroots organizations and individuals the motivation to continue pushing for equal rights. If not for Brown v. Board of Education, no one would have believed that desegregation was even possible. If not for the Civil Rights Act of 1957, African Americans and other supporters of racial justice would have had to look back to the 1860s and 70s for the last act of support by their government. The federal government was by no means influential, but it did provide the sparks that allowed the civil rights movement to ignite.