

What are civil rights?

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The March on Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. People marched for equal rights, good housing, and an end to racism. Photo by: Warren K. Leffler from Wikimedia.

What does "civil rights" mean to Americans?

The Declaration of Independence says, "... All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This statement explains the rights of all Americans.

The rights of people in a society are defined by the government, with input from its citizens. This means civil rights are rights guaranteed to people because they are citizens of a nation.

It does not matter if these people are different genders, races or have different religious beliefs. As long as they are citizens, they have equal rights. However, not all people are able to exercise their rights as Americans.

This is true both today and in the past.

U.S. Constitution Segregates Native Americans And Blacks

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence stated that the United States was its own country and no longer under British rule. In 1789, the newly formed government approved the U.S. Constitution. It explained the rights of its citizens. It also formalized the segregation of Native Americans and black people.

A year later, Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1790. It stated that to become a U.S. citizen, a person must be “a free white person, of good character, living in the United States for two years.” People born in the United States to fathers born in the United States, or who had become citizens officially, were citizens. Women could be citizens, too. But they were unable to vote in most states. Women also had limits to their rights. They often could not own property.

The country soon began to grow to the West. The American population had more races than before. For example, a treaty in 1848 after a war with Mexico promised Mexicans in the United States rights as citizens. They were not treated fairly when it came to owning property or in politics.

The Chinese population in the United States also experienced the same treatment. Chinese people had become an important part of western mining towns. They built many of the railroads that connected the East Coast to the West Coast. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 would not allow them to become Americans.

The Dred Scott decision in 1857 took away civil rights for African-Americans. It prevented them from becoming citizens. This left free and enslaved African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Native Americans segregated in a growing nation.

Rights On Paper But Not In Daily Lives

Changes to the U.S. Constitution in the late 1800s allowed many of these people to become citizens. Native Americans, though, were not allowed to become citizens until 1924.

In the late 1880s, Jim Crow laws allowed the segregation between blacks and whites. These and other laws undermined the changes to the Constitution that granted equal rights for citizens. People who had become citizens found their rights denied or ignored.

For African-Americans, Latinos and Asians, becoming or being born U.S. citizens did not ensure their rights. Certain groups had to fight for the rights they had been given by law. But those laws were only rights on paper. They did not actually have those rights in their daily lives. For this reason, the fight for civil rights is called the “civil rights struggle.”

Over time, discriminated groups of Americans expanded. Today they also include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people and disabled people.

The civil rights struggle was about equal treatment for all races. Now, it is about equal treatment for all groups.