Differentiate Between SNCC and SCLC and Causes

Posted on October 9, 2018

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Introduction

The modern Civil Rights Movement in the United States was not one organization, one tactic, or one moment. It developed through court challenges, boycotts, sit-ins, voter-registration campaigns, student organizing, religious leadership, local activism, and later debates over Black Power and community control. Several of the terms commonly associated with the movement describe very different forms of action. The Greensboro sit-ins challenged segregation in public accommodations through disciplined direct action; the Montgomery Bus Boycott targeted segregated transportation through sustained economic pressure; Freedom Rides tested federal desegregation rulings in interstate travel; Freedom Summer concentrated on voting rights in Mississippi; and organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) developed different leadership styles even when they worked toward overlapping goals. Understanding these differences is important because the movement changed over time as activists confronted both legal segregation and forms of racial inequality that persisted even where discriminatory laws had been removed.

Direct Action, Boycotts, and the Expansion of Protest

The sit-in movement became one of the clearest examples of youth-led direct action. On February 1, 1960, four Black students from North Carolina A&T sat at the whites-only lunch counter in the Greensboro Woolworth store and refused to leave when service was denied. Their protest spread quickly to other cities and helped demonstrate that segregation could be challenged through disciplined occupation of public space. The Greensboro campaign did not by itself end all segregation, but it accelerated a national student movement and created the conditions in which SNCC was formed only a few months later. Boycotts used a different form of leverage. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, beginning after Rosa Parks's arrest in December 1955, sustained economic and political pressure against segregated public transportation for more than a year. Martin Luther King Jr., local clergy, the Women's Political Council, and thousands of ordinary Black residents participated, while the legal challenge to bus segregation ultimately produced a federal court ruling that ended the system.

Economic boycotts were also used against private employers and businesses accused of racial discrimination. Campaigns involving consumer brands, including the boycott of Wonder Bread associated with demands for fair employment practices, reflected a broader strategy: Black consumers could use purchasing power to pressure companies whose hiring or promotion practices excluded Black workers. Such campaigns did not all achieve the same visibility as Montgomery, but they expanded civil-rights activism beyond public accommodations into employment and corporate policy. The significance of boycotts therefore lies not only in refusing a product or service but in connecting consumer behavior to demands for institutional change.

Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, and Voting Rights

The Freedom Rides of 1961 challenged segregation in interstate bus travel. Black and white activists deliberately rode together through the South to test whether federal law and Supreme Court decisions prohibiting segregation in interstate transportation would actually be enforced. Riders faced mob violence, arrests, and attacks, yet the campaign forced greater federal attention and helped produce stronger enforcement by the Interstate Commerce Commission. SNCC activists became particularly important after early Freedom Riders were attacked, showing the organization's willingness to continue direct action despite serious danger.

Freedom Summer was different from the Freedom Rides. It was a 1964 campaign centered in Mississippi that attempted to expand Black voter registration, build Freedom Schools, and challenge a political system that excluded most Black citizens through intimidation, discriminatory registration practices, and violence. The project was coordinated through the Council of Federated Organizations and included major participation by SNCC, CORE, local activists, and more than a thousand volunteers. Freedom Summer did not follow from a congressional grant of voting rights after the Civil Rights Act of 1964; rather, it exposed the continuing barriers to Black political participation and helped build momentum toward the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner demonstrated the severe risks faced by civil-rights workers in Mississippi.

SNCC and SCLC: Different Organizational Models

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference emerged in 1957 from the network of Black ministers and activists who had gained national visibility through the Montgomery movement. Martin Luther King Jr. became its best-known leader, and figures such as Ralph Abernathy, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and other organizers shaped its development. SCLC often worked through established Black churches and prominent leaders, using mass meetings, nonviolent protest, boycotts, marches, and negotiated campaigns to expose segregation and create federal pressure. Its structure gave nationally recognized leaders an important role in choosing campaigns and communicating the

movement’s moral claims to a broad audience.

SNCC developed differently. The organization grew out of the student sit-in movement in April 1960 after Ella Baker brought student activists together at Shaw University. Baker encouraged the students to remain organizationally independent rather than become a youth branch of SCLC. SNCC consequently emphasized grassroots leadership, local organizing, participatory decision-making, and the development of community power. Its field secretaries worked for long periods in rural and small-town communities, particularly on voter registration in the Deep South. SNCC and SCLC were not simply rivals. They cooperated in several campaigns, but tensions developed over leadership style, strategy, pace, and the degree to which local people or nationally prominent leaders should control movement decisions.

This distinction helps explain why SNCC eventually moved in a more radical direction. Many young organizers concluded that nonviolent protest alone could not guarantee protection against racist violence and that integration into existing institutions was insufficient without political and economic power. SCLC remained more consistently identified with King’s philosophy of nonviolence and interracial coalition building. SNCC increasingly emphasized independent Black political organization and, by the mid-1960s, became closely associated with the language of Black Power.

Black Power and the Changing Movement

Black Power became nationally prominent in 1966 when SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael used the slogan during the March Against Fear in Mississippi. The phrase drew on older traditions of Black nationalism, self-determination, racial pride, institution building, and political independence. It did not have one universally accepted meaning. For some activists it meant strengthening Black-controlled institutions and political organizations; for others it represented cultural pride, economic self-sufficiency, community defense, or rejection of dependence on white liberal organizations. Its rise reflected frustration with the slow pace of change, continuing violence against activists, urban inequality, and the limits of federal civil-rights victories.

Black Power differed from the earlier integrationist language often associated with SCLC, but it should not be described only as a turn toward violence. Many Black Power advocates focused on political control, local institutions, economic development, and the right of Black communities to define their own goals. The movement did, however, include stronger support among some activists for armed self-defense and a sharper critique of nonviolence as a universal strategy. These debates revealed that the Black freedom struggle after 1965 was increasingly concerned not only with removing discriminatory laws but with determining who controlled schools, neighborhoods, police, employment, and political representation.

De Jure and De Facto Segregation

De jure segregation is segregation established or enforced by law. Jim Crow statutes that required separate public facilities are classic examples. De facto segregation describes separation that exists in practice without an explicit law requiring racial separation. Housing discrimination, residential patterns, school-district boundaries, unequal wealth, private choices, and historic government policy can all contribute to de facto segregation. The distinction became increasingly important after major legal victories because eliminating laws mandating segregation did not automatically produce racially integrated schools or neighborhoods.

Boston became a major example of this conflict. Civil-rights activists challenged racial inequality in public schools even though Massachusetts did not operate under the same Jim Crow statutes found in the South. The Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act of 1965 required attention to racial imbalance in public schools and created pressure on local districts to address segregation. METCO, established in the 1960s, developed as a voluntary program allowing students from Boston and Springfield to attend participating suburban schools. These policies reflected a broader realization that civil rights in northern cities required confronting residential patterns, school boundaries, funding, and opportunity rather than only repealing explicitly segregationist statutes.

Politics, Leadership, and the Roots of the 1960s

Civil-rights organizations also differed in the way they balanced instrumental and expressive politics. Instrumental politics focuses on concrete objectives such as passing legislation, registering voters, changing a policy, or winning an election. Expressive politics emphasizes identity, solidarity, morale, cultural meaning, and the experience of collective participation. Successful movements often need both. A voter-registration campaign has an instrumental objective, but the relationships and sense of dignity created through organizing can also transform participants even before the policy goal is achieved.

The activism of the 1960s did not appear suddenly. Developments in the 1940s and 1950s—including Black military service during World War II, migration to cities, labor organizing, legal challenges by the NAACP, the desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and growing youth activism—created organizational networks and political expectations that later campaigns inherited. The 1960s intensified these trends as television exposed violence against demonstrators, students entered the movement in large numbers, and federal officials faced increasing pressure to enforce constitutional rights.

Conclusion

SNCC and SCLC were both central to the Civil Rights Movement, but they represented different organizational traditions. SCLC drew heavily on Black churches, nationally recognized leadership, mass mobilization, and King's philosophy of nonviolent protest. SNCC grew from the student sit-ins and emphasized grassroots organizing, local leadership, participatory decision-making, and eventually Black political self-determination. Their differences became more visible as the movement moved from attacking explicit Jim Crow laws toward confronting voter suppression, economic inequality, school segregation, community power, and racial violence.

The surrounding campaigns—sit-ins, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, Boston school activism, and later Black Power organizing—show that the Civil Rights Movement cannot be reduced to one method. Legal challenges, economic pressure, nonviolent direct action, voter registration, community institution building, and political self-determination all contributed to change. The movement's history is therefore best understood as a changing coalition of organizations and local communities responding to different forms of racial inequality with different strategies.

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