

This lesson, "Building Constiencies," comes from Constitutional Rights Foundation's Civic Action Project (CAP). It focuses on the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a case study of the importance of building constituencies to impact social problems.

CAP is a project-based learning program that engages high school students in selecting an issue that matters to them, making connections between their issue and public policy, and taking civic actions to try to address the issue.

CAP is housed on its own website which is shared by teachers and students.

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# Building Constituencies

## Overview

This lesson introduces students to the importance of building a constituency to support or oppose public policies using the case study of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as an example. Students read primary documents from the boycott and discuss how the documents show how leaders tried to build support.

## Common Core State Standards Connections

First, students complete a brief reading about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Connection to: **RH.11-12.2** (Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source...). Next, they examine documents created during the boycott and identify the civic actions taken to help build constituencies.

Connections to: **RH.11-12.1** (Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.); and **RH.11-12.2** (Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source...).

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe how building constituencies is an important civic action using the Montgomery Bus Boycott as an example.
- Analyze a primary document to identify civic actions, including methods that boycott leaders either used or thought of to build support for the boycott.

## Preparation & Materials

- Handout 10A: The Montgomery Bus Boycott—1 per student
- Handout 10B: Document Exploration—1 per student
- Handout 10C: Documents—1 document per group

## Procedure

### I. Focus Discussion

Help students build on prior knowledge about the civil rights movement by asking what they know about it, who Martin Luther King was, Rosa Parks, etc.

- A. Explain that citizens who have affected community problems through policy change have almost always had to build support from others; they had to build a constituency. Today students are going to look at a historic example of people working together to right a wrong.
- B. Distribute **Handout 10A: The Montgomery Bus Boycott**. Ask students to read the handout and then hold a brief discussion by asking students to use their existing knowledge and the information they read to answer these questions:

- What was the boycott about?
  - How was it ultimately resolved?
  - Boycotts almost always fail. Why do you think this one was successful?
- C. Tell students that they are going to examine documents related to the beginning of the bus boycott to explore the civic actions, especially the civic action of gaining support to build a constituency.

## **II. Small-Group Activity: Document Exploration**

- A. Divide students into eight groups. Distribute **Handout 10B: Document Exploration** to each student. Assign and distribute to each group one or more of the eight documents from **Handout 10C: Documents**.
- B. When students are ready, hold a brief discussion on the documents by calling on the groups in order (Document 1 first and Document 8 last), asking what the document is and what it teaches about building support.

# The Montgomery Bus Boycott

On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger, as required by the city's segregation laws. Although often depicted as a weary older woman too tired to get up and move, Parks was actually a longtime, active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A committed civil rights activist, she decided that she was not going to move. She was arrested and jailed for her defiant and courageous act.

The NAACP saw Parks' arrest as an opportunity to challenge segregation laws in a major Southern city. Montgomery's black political and religious leaders came together to support a one-day boycott on December 5 in protest of Parks' arrest.

More than 75 percent of Montgomery's black residents regularly used the bus system. On December 5, 1955, only eight black people rode Montgomery's buses. The success of the one-day boycott had depended on having the support of a large constituency. Indeed, on that day, organizers formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to lead boycott activities; its founders chose a young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as its chairman.

The MIA coordinated and helped to sustain what would become a long-term boycott. It demanded the elimination of segregation policy for the city's buses. Until this demand was met, black residents would refuse to ride Montgomery's buses.

Car pools were organized to get black participants to work. Many walked where they needed to go. After a month, Montgomery's businesses were beginning to feel the boycott's effects. Some people who supported segregation retaliated. Black people were arrested for walking on public sidewalks. The homes of Dr. King, E.D. Nixon (the local NAACP president), and Pastor Robert Graetz (a white minister who was a member of the MIA) were bombed in 1956. But King and others continued to build a constituency of people who supported civil rights and used non-violence and civil disobedience to resist violent opposition.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted 382 days. It ended when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation on the city's buses was unconstitutional and ordered the city to desegregate.

The success of eliminating the bus segregation policy in Montgomery by boycotting depended on building a constituency of people who would not only support the boycott but participate in it. From the planning of the boycott to the Supreme Court ruling, thousands of people took many, many civic actions.

You are going to examine a document from the early days of the boycott to find out more about specific civic actions, especially the civic action of gaining support for your cause to build constituencies.

## For Discussion

1. What was the boycott about? (Describe in terms of policy and civic actions.)
2. Boycotts almost always fail. Why do you think this one was successful?
3. How was the Montgomery's bus segregation issue ultimately resolved?



Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, 1955.  
*Wikimedia Commons*

## Document Exploration

In your group:

1. Read the document you are assigned and discuss the following:
  - What is surprising or interesting about the document?
  - Why is the document important?
  - What civic action(s) are involved?
  
2. Focus on what the document tells you about building constituencies and gaining support. Discuss these questions:
  - What does this document show about gaining or keeping support for the Montgomery Bus Boycott?
  - What groups are appealed to (or does the document propose appealing to)?
  - Do you think the appeal or appeals were worth making? Why?
  
3. Be prepared to report on the document, telling what it is, why it is important, and what it tells about how the boycott attempted to gain support. Be prepared to answer the questions you discussed.

## Excerpt from Letter to the Mayor

*Founded in 1946, the Women's Political Council was an organization of African-American professional women in Montgomery, most of them educators. It was deeply involved in community issues. Its president, Jo Ann Robinson, often worked behind the scenes, but Dr. King remembered her as, "Apparently indefatigable, she, perhaps more than any other person, was active on every level of the protest."*

May 21, 1954

Honorable Mayor W. A. Gayle  
City Hall  
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Sir:

The Women's Political Council is very grateful to you and the City Commissioners for the hearing you allowed our representative during the month of March, 1954, when the "city-bus-fare-increase case" was being reviewed. There were several things the Council asked for:

- A city law that would make it possible for Negroes to sit from back toward front, and whites from front toward back until all the seats are taken.
- That Negroes not be asked or forced to pay fare at front and go to the rear of the bus to enter.
- That busses stop at every corner in residential sections occupied by Negroes as they do in communities where whites reside. . . .

Mayor Gayle, three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate.

More and more of our people are already arranging with neighbors and friends to ride to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers.

There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of busses. We, sir, do not feel that forceful measures are necessary in bargaining for a convenience which is right for all bus passengers. We, the Council, believe that when this matter has been put before you and the Commissioners, that agreeable terms can be met in a quiet . . . manner to the satisfaction of all concerned. . . .

Please consider this plea, and if possible, act favorably upon it, for even now plans are being made to ride less, or not at all, on our busses. We do not want this.

Respectfully yours,  
The Women's Political Council  
Jo Ann Robinson, President

Source: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-wa-gayle>

## Excerpt from Leaflet

*Following the arrest of Rosa Parks, leaders in the African American community decided action must be taken. Jo Ann Robinson of the Women's Political Council and a fellow professor at Alabama State College (a segregated school) drafted and copied on a mimeograph machine the following leaflet, which Robinson and two students distributed throughout the black community.*

*Reverends King and Abernathy revised this leaflet and then distributed it further over the weekend. The revised leaflet also urged people following the boycott to attend a gathering at 7 p.m. on Monday at Holt Street Baptist Church.*

This is for Monday, December 5, 1955

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down.

It is the second time since the . . . [recent] case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped.

Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate.

Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats.

If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother.

This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.

You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus.

You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses Monday.

Source:

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/announcement-another-negro-woman-has-been-arrested-dont-ride-bus>

## Excerpt of a Reflection on the Mass Meeting, December 5, 1955 By Ralph Abernathy

*Reverend Ralph Abernathy was pastor of Montgomery's First Baptist Church. He was one of the founding members of, and suggested the name for, the Montgomery Improvement Association.*



Reverend Abernathy. 1968.  
*Wikimedia Commons.*

We, M. L. King, and I, went to the meeting together. It was drizzling rain; I had been working up until the last minute on the resolutions. I was given instructions: one, to call off the protest, or two, if indicated, to continue the protest until the grievances were granted. We had had a successful "one-day protest," but we feared that if we extended it beyond the first day, we might fail; it might be better after all to call the protest off, and then we could hold this "one-day boycott" as a threat for future negotiations. However, we were to determine whether to continue the protest by the size of the crowds. If we found a large number of persons at the church this would indicate that Negroes would be interested in continuing the protest. But, if there were only a few, we felt that Negroes were not sufficiently interested, and that they might return to the buses the next day even in spite of our wishes.

When we got about twenty blocks from the church we saw cars parked solid; we wondered if there was a funeral or a death in the community. But as we got closer to the church we saw a great mass of people. The *Montgomery Advertiser* [a newspaper] estimated the crowd at approximately seven thousand persons all trying to get in a church that will accommodate less than a thousand. It took us about fifteen minutes to work our way through the crowd by pleading: "Please let us through—we are Reverend King and Reverend Abernathy. Please permit us to get through."

Once we broke through the crowd there was another ten minutes of picture-taking coupled with flashing lights, cheering and hand-clapping. Those inside applauded for at least ten minutes.

It was apparent to us that the people were with us. It was then that all of the ministers who had previously refused to take part in the program came up to Reverend King and me to offer their services. . . . [Singing, prayers, scripture reading, and speech by the Reverend King followed.]

Mrs. Rosa Parks was presented to the mass meeting because we wanted her to become symbolic of our protest movement. Following her we presented Mr. Daniels, who happily for our meeting had been arrested on that day. . . . The appearance of these persons created enthusiasm, thereby giving added momentum to the movement.

We then heard the resolutions calling for the continuation of the boycott . . . unanimously and enthusiastically adopted by the 7,000 individuals both and outside the church. We closed the meeting by taking an offering with people marching down the aisles giving their nickels, dimes, quarters, and dollars for freedom. . . .

Excerpt from Ralph D. Abernathy, "The Natural History of a Social Movement," M.A. Thesis, Atlanta University, 1958.

Retrieved from <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosaparks/0/inquiry/main/resources/22/>



## Letter to *Time* Magazine

*Rev. Robert Graetz was a white Lutheran minister who led an African-American congregation in Montgomery. A member of the executive board of the MIA, Graetz was frequently harassed by white opponents for his involvement in the boycott, and his home was bombed several times. He wrote this letter to Time Magazine on December 22, 1955.*

National News Editor  
TIME Magazine  
TIME & LIFE Building  
9 Rockefeller Plaza  
New York 20, New York

Subject: Bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Sir:

I am writing this letter to you, because I have long been impressed with the fair and unbiased treatment you give in your news stories. (I am a regular cover-to-cover TIME reader.) I have been particularly impressed with the bold and courageous way in which you have handled the extremely touchy subject of race relations.

There is a story in the making here in Montgomery, Alabama, that may be just as explosive as the Till case . . . I am referring to the protest which the Negroes (and many whites) of Montgomery are making against the local bus company. . . .

What you may not know is that only part of the story is actually reaching the public through the normal channels of communication. The local newspapers have consistently printed one-sided stories about the developments in this protest. . . .

In addition, all of the "law-enforcement" agencies in the city and county have been doing everything possible to break the back of our campaign. Laws that have rarely been enforced are now being pulled out of the books and being used against the Negroes (but, we hear, not against the whites). . . .

I am a white Lutheran minister, serving a Negro congregation. I cannot even give my own members a ride in my car without fear of being stopped by the police and accused of running a taxi. On last Monday Sheriff Butler . . . stopped me, accused me of running a taxi, took me in for questioning, searched my car (without showing me a warrant or indicating that he had one), and finally released me. The same thing is being done over and over in this city every day.

If you want a good look at the way a one-race press and a one-race police force band together to discredit fifty thousand people who are tired of being treated like animals on the city busses, and who are registering their feelings by refraining from riding those busses, then I urge you to send a reporter to Montgomery as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,  
Robert Graetz

Copies: Dr. King, Atty. Gray, Rev. Hughes

Source: [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/InVol6/551222-000.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/InVol6/551222-000.pdf)

## Excerpt from an Advertisement

On Christmas Day 1955, the Montgomery Improvement Association took out this half-page advertisement in two local newspapers, the Sunday Advertiser and the Alabama Journal.

### To the Montgomery Public

We, the negro citizens of Montgomery, feel that the public has a right to know our complaints and grievances which have resulted in the protest against the Montgomery City Lines and our refusal to ride city busses. We, therefore, set forth here some of the many bitter experiences of our people, who have, at various times, been pushed around, embarrassed, threatened, intimidated and abused in a manner that has caused the meekest to rise in resentment:

#### COMPLAINTS:

1. *Courtesy:* The use of abusive language, name calling and threats have been the common practices . . . . We are ordered to move from seats to standing space under the threat of arrest . . . . No regard for sex or age is considered in exercising this authority by the bus operator.

2. *Seating:* . . . Negroes, old, young, men and women, mothers with babes in their arms, sick, afflicted, pregnant women, must relinquish their seats, even to school children . . . . On lines serving predominantly Negro sections, the ten front seats must remain vacant, even though no white passenger boards the bus . . . .

3. *Arrests:* Numerous arrests have been made even though the person arrested is observing the policy as given us. . . .

6. *Passing up passengers:* In many instances the bus operators have . . . collected fares at the front door and, after commanding Negro passengers to enter from the back door, they have driven off, leaving them standing.

9. *Adjudication:* Every effort has been used to get the bus company to remove the causes of these complaints. .

10. *The great decision:* The bus protest is not merely in protest of the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, but is the culmination of a series of unpleasant incidents over a period of years. It is an upsurging of a ground swell . . . . Our cup of tolerance has run over. . . .

11. *Our proposal:* . . . 1. That assurance of more courtesy be extended the bus riders. . . .

2. That the seating of passengers will be on a "First-come, First-Served" basis. This means that the Negro passengers will begin seating from the rear of the bus toward the front and white passengers from the front toward the rear, until all seats are taken. Once seated, no passenger will be compelled to relinquish his seat . . . .

3. That Negro bus drivers be employed on the bus lines serving predominantly Negro areas . . . .

12. *Nature of movement:*

1. Non violence . . . .

2. Coercion—There has not been any coercion on the part of any leader to force any one to stay off the busses. . . .

3. Arbitration—We are willing to arbitrate. We feel that this can be done with men and women of good will. However, we find it rather difficult to arbitrate in good faith with those whose public pronouncements are anti-Negro and whose only desire seems to be that of maintaining the status quo. We call upon men of good-will, who will be willing to treat this issue in the spirit of HIM whose birth we celebrate at this season, to meet with us. We stand for Christian teachings and the concepts of democracy for which men and women of all races have fought and died.

The Negro Ministers of Montgomery and Their Congregations

Source: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/montgomery-public>

## Letter to W.C. Patton

On December 19, 1955, W.C. Patton of the Alabama National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had written a report on the boycott to Roy Wilkins, the head of the national NAACP. Patton's report noted that the boycott was then aiming at reforming the segregated bus system, not getting rid of it. (The goal would change as the boycott went on.) This is Wilkins' response to the report, in a letter he wrote on December 27.

Mr. W. C. Patton  
1630 Fourth Avenue, North  
Birmingham, Alabama

Dear Mr. Patton:

Thank you for your memorandum on the Montgomery, Alabama, movement protesting segregation on the buses. Mr. Marshall is away, but I shall consult with Mr. Carter on the legal angle and our cooperation thereon. [*Thurgood Marshall was the NAACP's chief counsel and later a U.S. Supreme Court justice. Robert L. Carter was Marshall's assistant and later succeeded him at the NAACP.*]

In the meantime I think it should be understood that the NAACP will not officially enter the case or use its legal staff on any other basis than the abolition of segregated seating on the city buses. We now have a city bus case on appeal from South Carolina, having won in the lower court. Obviously, when our national program calls for abolishing segregation and our lawyers are fighting on that basis in South Carolina, we could not enter an Alabama case asking merely for more polite segregation.

Please keep me advised. I will write you or have Mr. Carter write you shortly.

Best wishes for the Holiday Season.

Very sincerely yours,  
Roy Wilkins  
Executive Secretary

Source: <http://okra.stanford.edu/en/permalink/document551227-000>

## Excerpt from an Interview

*On January 20, 1956, Donald T. Ferron, a researcher from Fisk University — a private, African-American university in Nashville whose students were on the front lines of the civil rights movement — interviewed Rufus A. Lewis, a member of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Lewis co-chaired its transportation committee, which was in charge of providing alternative transportation for those taking part in the boycott.*

Ferron: What is your job as co-chairman?

Lewis: I try to get private cars, and adequate amount of service out of the system, designate gas out to those who need help with gas, to get dispatch and pick-up stations, and persons to organize the riding public. A dispatching place is where people congregate in the morning to go to work. These dispatch places are mostly churches and voter's clubs. . . .

Ferron: How effective is the movement?

Lewis: About 90% effective. There are a very few Negroes who ride the buses now. I don't know who they are. They hide themselves on the bus by sitting very low in the seats. They may be those who come from rural areas and don't know about what's happening.

Ferron: To what do you attribute the success of the movement?

Lewis: I would say that there are three reasons: (1) The most important is the attitude of the people—so many have been mistreated that they're just tired of the situation. (2) Pamphlets suggesting not to ride the buses. (3) The complete cooperation of the Protestant ministers in the city. The white press helped by printing a copy of the pamphlet on the front page. I would call this an indirect aid. And the police driving behind buses in the morning (to prevent Negroes from trying to intimidate or prevent other Negroes from riding the buses). People didn't know why they followed the buses, but they thought it was for the purpose of preventing people from riding. Five days later the buses were taken off the streets in predominantly Negro areas. This was interpreted to mean that buses didn't want to carry Negro passengers any more. The reason given for taking buses off the street was that one was fired into by Negroes at Holcombe and Jeff Davis Streets. This is a white neighborhood and the shot is reported to have been fired from an upstairs apartment. And then we've financial aid from New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, New Orleans, and places in Alabama, without any particular appeal. We also receive donations from whites who refuse to leave their names. . . .

Source: <http://okra.stanford.edu/en/permalink/document560120-001>

## Excerpt from *The Reminiscences of Bayard Rustin*

*Bayard Rustin was a protégé of labor leader A. Phillip Randolph who proposed a march on Washington as early as 1941. As a gay man facing anti-gay discrimination, he was not often in the spotlight. Nonetheless, Rustin was the organizer and leader of numerous protests from the 1940s to the 1960s, including the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He advised Dr. King on nonviolence and strategy. The excerpt below is from a series of interviews Rustin gave shortly before his death in 1987.*

FEBRUARY 21

I ARRIVED in Montgomery . . . I sat in on a conference with a committee of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which coordinates the protest activities. Three recommendations were accepted:

1. The movement will always be called a non-violent protest rather than a boycott in order to keep its fundamental character uppermost.
2. A pin should be designed for all those who do not ride the busses to wear as a symbol of unity, encouragement, and mutual support.
3. The slogan for the movement will be "Victory without Violence."

FEBRUARY 23

. . . Exactly at 7 the one hundred who had been arrested worked their way to the pulpit through 5,000 cheering men, women and children. Overnight these leaders had become symbols of courage. . . Television cameras ground away, as King was finally able to open the meeting. He began: "We are not struggling merely for the rights of Negroes but for all the people of Montgomery, black and white. We are determined to make America a better place for all people. Ours is a non-violent protest. . ."

FEBRUARY 24

. . . This afternoon the coordinating committee rejected a proposal that people be asked to stop work for one hour on March 28. I was impressed with the leaders' response, which adhered to the Gandhian principle of consideration for one's opponents. As King put it, "We do not want to place too much of a burden upon white housewives nor to give them the impression that we are pushing them against the wall."

This evening a few of the leaders got together to consider a constructive program for inculcating the philosophy of non-violence in the community. After hours of serious discussion, several proposals were accepted. The following impressed me as being particularly significant:

- An essay contest for high-school students on the subject, "Why We Should Use Non-violence in Our Struggle."
- The distribution of a pamphlet on non-violence.
- The importance of preaching non-violence in the churches.
- The possibility of a workshop on the theory and practice of non-violence.

This meeting concluded with agreement that the committee should do everything possible to negotiate the issues. The Montgomery Improvement Association is asking for these assurances:

- Greater courtesy on the part of drivers.
- Accepting first come, first served seating within the pattern of segregation while the question of intra-state segregation is being decided in the courts.
- The employment of some Negro drivers on predominantly Negro routes.

Source: [https://oralhistoryportal.library.columbia.edu/document.php?id=ldpd\\_4073467](https://oralhistoryportal.library.columbia.edu/document.php?id=ldpd_4073467)