

The Transformation of Civil Rights in the United States: How *Brown v. Board of Education* Case Shaped Global Views on Segregation

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ABSTRACT

The 1954 Supreme Court Case ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* is arguably the most pivotal legal decision in American history, dismantling the "separate but equal" doctrine established by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision and kickstarting the broader Civil Rights movement. This historical paper analyzes the contradiction between the American democratic ideals on which the country was founded and the systematic inequalities enforced by the Jim Crow laws, through the tracking of legislative and social forces that led to the monumental decision.

Drawing on primary legislative documents, congressional records, and historical analysis, this paper Argues that *Brown* accomplished far more than simply desegregating educational environments. By grounding its argument in the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court transformed the federal view of segregation and shifted their ruling into an instrument of broader civil rights enforcement. The ruling directly led to campaigns like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham protests while also contributing to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

However, this paper also delves into the limitations of the *Brown* decision. Southern resistance through the Southern Manifesto, Massive Resistance, and violent opposition, significantly stunted the impact of the decision in the years that followed, illustrating that judicial reform cannot solely dismantle social systems. Ultimately, the *Brown* decision is not just understood as a conclusion of the *Plessy* doctrine, but as a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement and for those who continue to define American debates over justice and equality.

INTRODUCTION

From the late 1870s until 1965, primarily in the South, a discriminatory set of laws known as Jim Crow legally separated black and white citizens in every public space, and nowhere was a far larger threat to society than the discrimination in education. Black students studied from tattered textbooks rejected by

the white schools. Their classrooms were overcrowded, sometimes filled with students of different ages, the roof leaked and electricity was a privilege. In many Southern districts, Black schools received nearly 30 times less funding per student compared to their white counterparts, despite serving equal numbers of students. While fancy buses transported white children across town to well-equipped buildings, Black children were forced to walk for miles to reach the lone tumbledown excuse for a school.

These inequalities were enforced by state laws under the doctrine "separate but equal" not because of theory or logic, but because of the color of a man's skin. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had established this doctrine making inequality not only tolerated but in some instances praised and legal. Segregation had reinforced a system in which African American students were denied equal opportunity, and their futures chosen for them by a man-made law.

These conditions exposed that America's promise about democracy did not match what Black students experienced. By the mid-20th century, the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment remained in contrast to the reality which millions of Black students faced under Jim Crow statutes. In 1954, when the Supreme Court made its unanimous ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education*, it not only broke down barriers set in place by these laws, but it removed the legal basis for racial segregation in our nation. "Although the Court's declaration of "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" did not end discrimination overnight", it marked a critical point in history that reshaped the course of the Civil Rights Movement by making it clear that segregation was unfair and unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of Education* helped push a movement that ended segregation, not without a backlash and forced the federal government to take action to enforce reform.

Drawing on Supreme Court opinions, congressional records, and historical scholarships on Jim Crow education, this paper analyzes how *Brown* shaped both law and altered social pressure regarding inequality. Case studies of Southern resistance, federal enforcement, and similar rulings show that *Brown* operated as a constitutional turning point for broader campaigns for justice and equality.

THE CRACKS IN "SEPARATE BUT EQUAL"

A very wise man, named Franklin Delano Roosevelt, once said that "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." Yet in the early 20th-century United States, unfortunately, education did not serve as an equal safeguard for all citizens. For millions of African American students living under Jim Crow laws, schooling was deliberately designed to limit opportunity instead of informing students of their true potential. It was clear that public education was the weapon of choice, but these laws were meant to harm the entire race.

Across much of the South, state governments practiced a racially divided school system and distributed funding in ways "they saw fit." Black schools were often overcrowded with hundreds of students per class

and textbooks were outdated versions of the ones handed down from the white institutions. Academic calendars were shortened to accommodate for agricultural labor, and teacher salaries were miniscule compared to their white counterparts. Meanwhile, white schools continued to benefit from stable funding, modern gyms and cafeterias, reliable transportation, and updated materials. In South Carolina, the conditions were even worse. In some cases, Black children had to walk 5 miles to school while white children rode past them, taunting and spitting at them. This huge disparity was masked behind the ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which supported the idea of “separate but equal” allowing states to claim compliance while perpetuating mass inequality.

By the early 1940s, civil rights attorneys began uncovering the contradictions between the American Dream promised to their children and the segregation that occurred in their schools. The NAACP, through the leadership of Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston gradually built “a march through the courts”, arguing that segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Equal Protection clause states that “no state shall deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of laws” and provided a foundation for civil rights attorneys to argue for federal involvement in civil rights cases. The issue extended beyond the education system to the denial of equal citizenship and respect for African Americans in Southern States. Evidence presented during the *Brown v. Board of Education* showed that segregation made Black students feel inferior to their white counterparts, hurting their confidence and undermining their ability to succeed in society. In a nation that globally claimed its schools protected democracy, systemic racism exposed a deep contradiction in its constitutional values.

Nor was *Brown* the first time a federal court had confronted this question. In 1947, the Ninth Circuit of Appeals ruled in *Mendez v. Westminster* that placing Mexican American children in separate “Mexican” schools violated the rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Unfortunately, because *Mendez* rested on California law and the specific circumstances of Mexican American students rather than the nationwide crisis of Equal protection, it wasn’t able to reach the Black students of the South. This suggests that the justice system, when working alone, was not fully equipped or even able to dismantle racial inequality. A single ruling could establish a legal principle, but it could not compel thousands of school boards to change their practice. It could not weave its way into the minds of the parents whose children saw their black counterparts face discrimination in every setting. The sustained political and social practice and pressure that are examined in the section that follow was just as necessary as the ruling itself.

By the time the *Brown v. Board of Education* case reached the Supreme Court, much of the democratic rhetoric preached by national leaders in the past had been contradicted by evidence of educational inequality, making the reality difficult to ignore. If education were the core of democracy, then segregation would not only be inherently unequal, but also at odds with Constitutional principles and values.

A CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced a decision that shocked much of the nation and led to intense resistance, especially in the South. Many white Southerners saw Brown as “a day of catastrophe.” In a unanimous ruling, the Supreme Court declared that “separating children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional”. This was a major step in ending Jim Crow laws that legalized systematic racism and kept Black students out of white schools. In 1950, the NAACP had started recruiting families across the United States to challenge this segregation. The case before the Court was a combination of lawsuits from 5 states including Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington D.C., and Delaware, in which Black families argued against state laws requiring racial segregation in public schools. Oliver Brown, father of Linda Brown, was one of the 13 parents who filed a case against the School Board of Topeka after his daughter was forced to walk two miles to the nearest Black school, even though a white school was only a few blocks away. Using the Fourteenth Amendment as their basis, the plaintiffs sought to ensure equal education for all Black students by involving the federal government in cases relating to civil rights.

Thurgood Marshall, the attorney who represented the families, including the Brown family, presented clear evidence showing that not only did Black schools receive unequal funding and fewer resources, but students at these schools suffered psychological harm and low self-esteem as a result of segregation. The idea that separation was created and practiced equally was far from reality. By ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, the Court overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and this began a period of reform that expanded the federal government’s role in state laws, giving a new momentum to the growing Civil Rights Movement. This is further explained in the reaction to this ruling below.

By eliminating the legitimacy of segregation, Brown strongly encouraged communities to challenge discrimination in other aspects of their everyday life. This impetus generated by Brown inspired direct action campaigns across the South. Some significant examples include the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, led by Rosa Parks after she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus and the Birmingham City Protests of 1963, which exposed the brutality from local authorities. The ruling also inspired other activists to push for equal voting rights and fair housing, contributing to the passing of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

THE REACTIONS AND LIMITS OF JUDICIAL REFORM

Although *Brown v. Board of Education* was an important legal victory, enforcing it in Southern states exposed many practical challenges, not to mention the deep divide within American society. In 1955, the Supreme Court issued a follow-up decision, commonly known as *Brown II*, requiring states to desegregate educational institutions “with all deliberate speed.” Because this mandate was confusing, many segregationists used it as an opportunity to delay integration. They argued that the ruling interfered with states’ rights. Southern politicians, including Alabama Governor George Wallace, famously declared

“Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”, refusing to support integration and insisting that educational policies should remain under states’ control without federal involvement.

The tensions between legal triumph and societal reality sits at the crossroad of the historiography of *Brown v. Board*. Legal historian Michael Klarman has argued that the immediate impact of the *Brown* ruling was not to end segregation entirely but to socially radicalize Southern Jim Crow policies, dissolving the resistance that was beginning to form. Klarman’s assertion refutes any simple story that states legal victory leads to immediate social change, instead arguing for a more complex alternative to the ruling. This paper builds on that idea rather than restating it: it agrees that *Brown* alone could not force societal change, however also argues that the backlash Klarman asserts was not solely evidence of the ruling’s failure. The paper argues that the ruling was more so part of a larger process in which *Brown* forced the federal government into having a more sustained role in the enforcement of civil rights traced in the sections that follow: from the Little Rock Nine crisis to the legislation of the late 1960s.

During the 1940s and 1950s, resistance grew stronger and turned into acts of organized opposition through both violence and anti-integration legislation. In 1956, more than 100 members of Congress, 19 US senators and 82 representatives from the South, signed a petition known as the Southern Manifesto, condemning the Court’s decision and urging southerners to resist what they described as the “chaos and confusion” that would follow school desegregation. Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd led a campaign of “Massive Resistance”, which aimed to cut off state funding or shut down schools that attempted to integrate. For many Black families and students, this felt intimidating and showed that legal reform alone could not easily change long-standing social systems and norms of that time.

The story of the Little Rock Nine in 1957 shows just how intense this backlash was. When nine African American students, including Elizabeth Eckford, attempted to attend Central High School in Arkansas, Governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to block their entry. Instead of being met with open arms or even basic decency, these students faced angry crowds and threats. In response, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops to enforce the Court’s ruling in *Brown* and protect the students, which further escalated the tension. This incident was one of the first times the federal government stepped into state matters during the civil rights era, setting a precedent that enforcing *Brown* required firm executive action and truly started peeling the layers of what it will take to enforce desegregation.

Civil rights activist Daisy Bates, who helped organize the Little Rock Nine, personally drove the students to school and worked tirelessly to protect them. Through her newspaper, she also exposed schools that did not follow the mandate, which often made her a target for intimidation. On September 25th, 1957, the students were finally able to attend school under federal protection. After its success in Arkansas, the impact of *Brown* quickly spread beyond the 5 original states involved in the case and became part of everyday life across the country.

It is not surprising that *Brown* provoked such a strong reaction. The violent opposition at the University of Mississippi in 1962, when James Meredith became the first African American student to be admitted,

showed that change would not come easily. However, it is important to acknowledge that these reactions do not diminish the importance of the decision. Instead, they highlight the depth of resistance to racial justice and underscore how Brown laid the groundwork for many reforms that followed in the decades ahead.

AN INCOMPLETE REVOLUTION: BROWN'S ENDURING LEGACY

Although the ruling rejected the legal basis for segregation, in reality, it could not immediately undo generations of racial divide. Even in many Northern cities, where segregation was less harsh, it persisted and could be seen through housing discrimination, redlining, and exclusionary zoning practices. In response, civil rights activists such as Vel Phillips and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. protested and worked alongside the federal government to confront racial inequality on multiple fronts. Specifically in Wisconsin, Phillips and Father Groppi led more than 200 marches in Milwaukee, pushing the administration to favor fair housing legislation that would prohibit discrimination based on race or religion. The Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, 14 years after Brown, showing how long and difficult the path to real change could be.

Even after new laws were passed and social progress was made, the struggle for equality continued. In the case of housing reform, change led to new forms of resistance. As these laws began to prohibit outright discrimination, many white families relocated to suburban communities in what became known as “white flight”, to maintain racial segregation. This migration recreated racial isolation in schools, even in the absence of segregation laws, through school district boundaries, local zoning rules, and economic disparities. In the early 1970s, federal courts tried to address these patterns in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg*, which mandated busing across district lines to promote desegregation. Unfortunately, however, these measures were strongly opposed and perhaps even deepened the political division, as some argued that separation was acceptable as long as it technically complied with law. This is a perfect example of how segregation reappeared in new forms and shows that achieving true equality requires more than simply passing legislation.

In my opinion, the significance of Brown lies in its ability to challenge the idea that “separate but equal” was acceptable. It opened the door to redefining equality, and gave people a way to integrate schools through the courts. Grounded in the 14th amendment, this decision affirmed that institutions and policies can be deemed as unconstitutional if they treat people unequally. The ruling later influenced debates over voting access, equal housing, and affirmative action, shaping how civil rights are understood today. More broadly, Brown showed that democracy depends on standing up and fighting for constitutional principles and being willing to challenge society's view of justice. It made the courts into an arena for civil rights reform and set the stage for ongoing debates about equality. In many ways, Brown shows that change could be slow and often unfinished, but its legacy still continues to influence our pursuit of justice and equality.

CONCLUSION

Most people remember the *Brown v. Board of Education* as simply the civil rights case that ended segregation in public schools, but I now understand that its impact was far beyond the classroom. The strong reaction from this ruling helped launch the modern Civil Rights Movement. By challenging state-supported segregation, it reshaped the balance between federal and state authority, leaving no middle ground and forcing the federal government to step in and take action to protect students' rights.

Brown dismantled the "separate but equal" doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Even though resistance was inevitable in the face of change and it took years to see any impact, *Brown* changed the legal foundation of American democracy. It expanded how people understood the Fourteenth Amendment's promise of equality and made it clear that segregation was unconstitutional. The ruling also showed that the Supreme Court could be used as a powerful tool to gain access to your constitutional rights. It shifted civil rights from being seen as a regional issue to a national concern and reinforced the idea that equality is not just an American democratic principle, but a basic human right.

Although we are still fighting for equality in education, housing and opportunity, *Brown v. Board of Education* remains a powerful reminder that the Constitution can be used to challenge injustice and serve as a stepping stone toward meaningful, lasting change.

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