

# Daily Journal

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The Civil Rights Act of 1957 at 67

## The work of freedom never ends

**From the landmark achievements of the 1957 civil rights legislation to ongoing debates over voting rights and workplace equity, protecting freedom and equality remains a continual responsibility for every generation.**

By Phyllis W. Cheng

**“O**ur civil and social rights form a central part of the heritage we are striving to defend on all fronts and with all our strength. I believe with all my heart that our vigilant guarding of these rights is a sacred obligation binding upon every citizen. To be true to one's own freedom is—in essence—to honor and respect the freedom of all others.”

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower,  
State of the Union Message, Feb. 2,  
1953

Sept. 9 marks the 67th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, a landmark statute that laid the foundation for modern civil rights laws. Its lessons continue to resonate in today's political and legal debates.

### The road to passage

The 1957 Act was born in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which struck down racial segregation in public schools, and amid growing demands to end voter suppression in the South. In response, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent Congress a proposal for civil rights legislation. Despite fierce resistance from Southern Democrats, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson skillfully navigated the bill to passage.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was the first major civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. Although its final version was weakened—stripping away stronger voter protections

and excluding school desegregation provisions—it marked an essential first step toward broader federal action.

**Key achievements of the 1957 Act**  
The Act's significance lay in three main accomplishments:

**1. Voting rights protections**—It authorized the U.S. Attorney General to seek federal injunctions against interference with voting rights by state and local officials.

**2. Civil Rights Commission**—It created a temporary Civil Rights

Commission to investigate voter suppression and other civil rights violations.

**3. Legislative foundation**—Most importantly, the Act opened the door to future, stronger civil rights laws.

### Legislative progeny

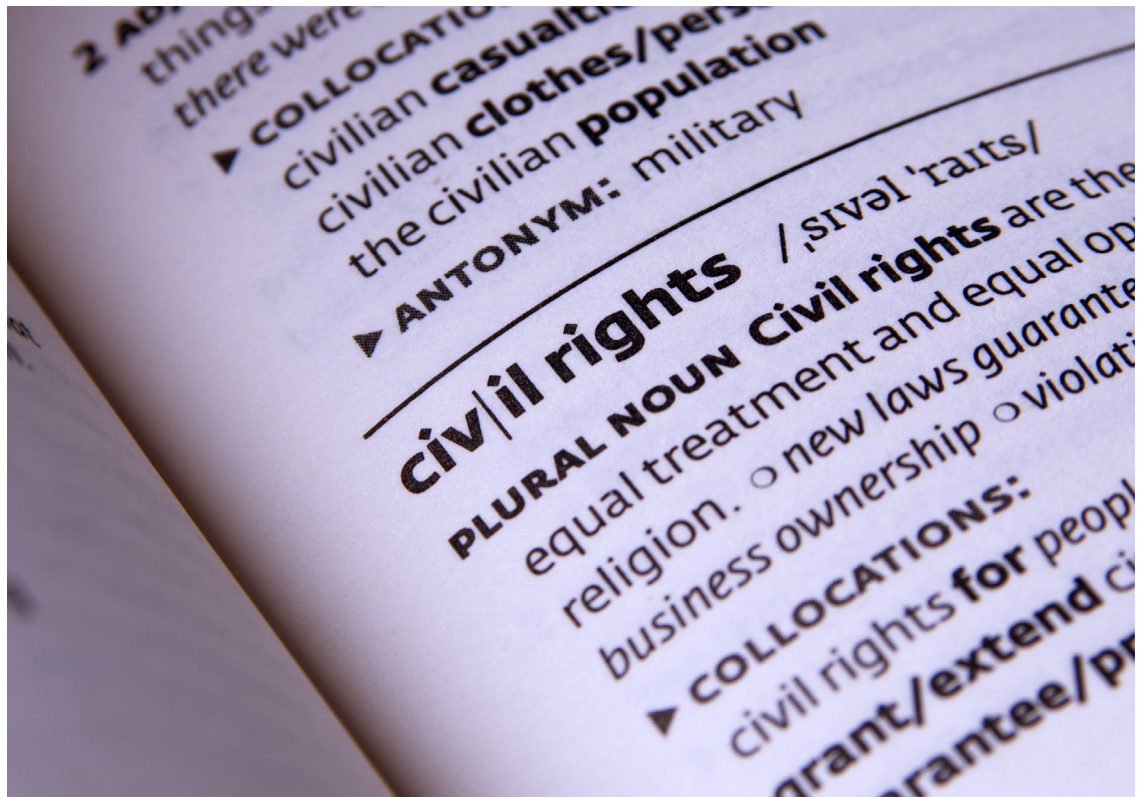
The Civil Rights Act of 1957 set the stage for a series of landmark statutes:

• **Civil Rights Act of 1960**—Further signed by President Eisenhower, the 1960 Act strengthened federal oversight of voter registration.

President Johnson signed into law the following major civil rights laws.

• **Civil Rights Act of 1964**—The most comprehensive civil rights law, prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin across multiple domains:

- *Title I* ensured equal application of voting rules.
- *Title II* banned discrimination in public accommodations.
- *Title III* prohibited denial of access to public facilities.
- *Title IV* encouraged school desegregation and gave enforcement



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power to the Attorney General.

- o *Title V* expanded the Civil Rights Commission's powers.

- o *Title VI* barred discrimination in federally funded programs.

- o *Title VII* prohibited employment discrimination and established the EEOC.

- o *Title VIII* required voter registration and voting data collection.

- o *Title IX* allowed removal of civil rights cases from state to federal courts.

- o *Title X* guaranteed jury trials in criminal contempt cases involving civil rights enforcement.

- **Voting Rights Act of 1965** - Eliminated discriminatory voting practices.

- **Civil Rights Act of 1968** (Fair Housing Act) - Outlawed discrimination in housing.

President George H.W. Bush signed the following civil rights law.

- **Civil Rights Act of 1991** - Expanded employee rights by allowing compensatory and punitive damages in employment discrimination cases.

#### **Beyond federal law**

States also advanced civil rights protections. California, for example, enacted the Fair Employment and Housing Act and the Unruh Civil Rights Act in 1959, which prohibit discrimination, harassment and retaliation on a broader scale than federal law. These statutes continue to provide robust remedies in employment, housing and public accommodations.

**Civil rights in the modern era**  
Civil rights enforcement today re-

flects shifting priorities. President Donald Trump has redefined enforcement strategies, including changes to agency missions, funding, staffing and regulatory approaches. Battles over voting rights, workplace equity and protections for marginalized groups remain at the forefront, with red and blue states clashing over policies such as voter redistricting and diversity initiatives.

#### **A beacon for today**

Despite its limitations, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 stands as a beacon of bipartisan achievement. It reminds us that protecting civil rights is central to America's democratic heritage. Any redefinition of civil rights in the present day requires the same spirit of leadership, compromise and resolve that made the 1957 Act possible.

**Phyllis W. Cheng** is a mediator at ADR Services, Inc. She previously served as director of the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, and vice chair of the Fair Employment and Housing Commission and the Comparable Worth Task Force.

