Definition: civil rights from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1. the basic freedoms and rights, as freedom of assembly, freedom of worship, freedom of association, the right to privacy, etc., which in an open and free society are considered to belong to the citizens by virtue of their citizenship alone.

Summary Article: Civil Rights from *Encyclopedia of Governance*

Civil rights are guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics. Examples of civil rights include the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to government services, the right to a public education, and the right to access public facilities. Civil rights are an essential component of good governance; when someone is denied access to the opportunities of participation in political society, that person is being denied his or her civil rights. In contrast to civil liberties, which are freedoms that are secured by placing restraints on government, civil rights are secured by positive government action, often in the form of legislation. Civil rights laws attempt to guarantee full and equal citizenship for people who have traditionally been discriminated against based on some group characteristic. When the enforcement of civil rights is found by many to be inadequate, a civil rights movement may emerge in order to call for equal application of the laws without discrimination.

Unlike other rights concepts, such as human rights or natural rights, in which people acquire rights inherently, perhaps from God or nature, civil rights must be given and guaranteed by the power of the state. Therefore, they vary greatly over time, culture, and form of government, and tend to follow societal trends that condone or abhor particular types of discrimination. For example, the civil rights of homosexuals have only recently come to the forefront of political debate in some Western democracies.

**The Black Civil Rights Movement**

Civil rights politics in the United States has its roots in the movements to end discrimination against Blacks. Though slavery was abolished and former slaves were officially granted political rights after the Civil War, in most southern states, Blacks continued to be systematically disenfranchised and excluded from public life, leading them to become perpetual second-class citizens. By the 1950s, the marginalization of Blacks, often taking an extremely violent form, had spurred a social movement of epic proportions. The Black civil rights movement, based mainly out of the Black churches and colleges of the south, involved extensive efforts of civil disobedience, such as marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, as well as voter education and voting drives. Most of these efforts were local in scope, but the impact was felt at the national level—a model of civil rights organizing that has since spread all over the globe.

**Other Movements Across the Globe**

In the 1960s, the Catholic-led civil rights movement in Northern Ireland was inspired by events in the...
United States. Its initial focus was fighting discriminatory gerrymandering that had been securing elections for Protestant Unionists. Later, internment of Catholic activists by the British government sparked both a civil disobedience campaign and the more radical strategies of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

A high-profile civil rights movement led to the end of the South African system of racial segregation known as Apartheid. The resistance movement began in the 1950s and 1960s when civil rights as a concept was sweeping the globe, but it was forced underground as most of its leaders were imprisoned and did not regain strength until the 1980s. International pressure combined with internal upheaval led to the eventual lifting of the ban on the African National Congress, the major Black party in South Africa and the release from prison of beloved leader Nelson Mandela in 1990. Mandela later went on to become the first Black President of South Africa in 1994.

A current movement that has striking parallels to both the American civil rights movement and the South African struggle against Apartheid is the civil disobedience and political activism of the Dalits in India. Formerly known as the Untouchables, Dalits (though they make up about twenty-five percent of the Indian population) were forced to live as second-class citizens, and are not even considered to be a part of India’s caste system of social hierarchy. Today, Dalit activism has led to great victories, including electing the first Dalit to political office.

In addition to these international movements, many groups in the United States have been inspired by the successes of the Black civil rights movement to fight for government protections, with varying degrees of success. Most notably, women gained the right to vote in 1920 via constitutional amendment and also have made many gains in the area of employment rights. The women’s movement has thus far been stopped short of passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have codified equal rights for women into the U.S. constitution. Since its failure to be ratified in 1982, women have seen many gains in court decisions that ruled against sex discrimination and the passing of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which established a commission designed to investigate the persistence of the “glass ceiling” that has prevented women from advancing to top management positions in the workplace.

A number of other groups have been the focus of civil rights movements since the 1960s. In 1968, Congress passed the Indian Civil Rights Act, designed to compensate for the forcible removal of many Native Americans from their land. Latinos and Asian Americans have fought for increased civil rights based on a history of discrimination over race, religion, language, and immigrant status. There have been some successes, in the form of provisions for bilingual education and affirmative action programs.

Most recently, Arab Americans and homosexuals have taken center stage in the struggle to achieve equal protection and equal opportunity in American society. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans suffered from heightened levels of discrimination and hate crimes and had to conform to government policies that restricted their liberties, as outlined in the controversial USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. Activism around this issue is in early stages of development.

The homosexual rights movement has made some major gains in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including a major Supreme Court decision that struck down legislation outlawing consensual sex between consenting adults. Some states currently allow gay and lesbian couples to apply for domestic partnership benefits, but there is mixed national opinion about whether or not homosexuals should be allowed to marry. Some local efforts, such as the San Francisco marriages of 2004, have spurred a
backlash that may lead to a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Almost all nations actively deny civil rights to some minority groups. Because civil rights are enforced by nations, it is difficult to establish an international standard for civil rights protection, despite the efforts of international governance bodies such as the United Nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, includes civil rights language, but is not binding on member states. Civil rights tend to increase as governments feel pressure, either from national movements or other nations, to enact change.

See also

Citizenship; Civil Society; Human Rights; Segregation; Social Justice; Social Movement Theory

Further Readings and References


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