



CASE STUDY

# The Montgomery Bus Boycott

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What objectives, targets, strategies, demands, and rhetoric should a nascent social movement choose as it confronts an entrenched system of white supremacy? How should it make decisions?

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## **SNF Agora Case Studies**

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Practitioners, teachers, organizational leaders, and trainers working with civic and political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

### **How to Use the Case**

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora Case Studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: “What would we do?”

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life activists (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these activists, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these activists while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they could have made, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

### **This case study is appropriate for:**

- High school students
- College students
- Book groups

**Keywords:** community organizing, faith-based organizing, nonviolence, boycotts, racial justice

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## Introduction

**THE MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA, BUS BOYCOTT of 1955–1956 is a classic example of a social movement episode that accomplished its immediate goals despite severe obstacles. It catapulted the 26-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. into international prominence and launched similar episodes in many American cities across the South and then also the North.**

By investigating their situation and choices, you can develop skills and insights to use as activists today. Depending on the instructions you are given (or how you choose to use this case), you may either:

- Play the role of leaders in the actual Montgomery civil rights movement in 1955 (recognizing that you cannot really know what their feelings and experiences were like, but striving to imagine yourselves in their position); or
- Play the role of participants who were not prominent leaders of the movement, such as students from Montgomery’s historically black university, Alabama State; or
- Play yourselves and simply evaluate the choices that the movement made or could have made from the perspective of the present.

This document provides some basic information that the movement’s leaders knew (or could have known) at the time. After reading it, please read the required supplemental materials and your choices of the optional materials listed below. Then work in groups of 5–7 people to write collective answers to the strategic questions at the end of this document.

The key decision-makers faced choices that may look obvious in retrospect but were extraordinarily difficult for them at the time.

## Learning Objectives for This Case Study

**By the end of this case study, you should be able to:**

1. Understand the differences among goals, targets, strategies, demands, and rhetoric;
2. Understand how the organizational structures of social movements are formed and how they evolve;
3. Understand the range of choices that confronted the actual movement in 1955, and the pros and cons of each choice;
4. Be able to reason with others about which choices to make.

## Case Narrative

### The Situation

#### Segregation in Alabama

The first enslaved Africans in what is now the United States were transported to a British North American settlement, Jamestown, in 1619, beginning a period of almost 250 years of slavery. By the 1800s, the scale was very large. States in the deep South became dependent on enslaved people to produce cotton and other crops on large plantations, while states in the North relied on the products of enslaved labor for industry and trade. By the time of the Civil War, 45 percent of the people of Alabama were enslaved African Americans.<sup>1</sup>

From 1865–1874, the period of Reconstruction in Alabama, slavery was abolished and African Americans won legal rights under the U.S. Constitution as a result of the 13th–15th Amendments.

However, once Reconstruction ended, a system of explicit and pervasive white supremacy was firmly established. (The image shows the official logo of the Alabama Democratic Party from 1904–1966, during which time every governor of the state was a Democrat.) Citizens were officially categorized by race. Laws prevented whites and African Americans from using the same schools, railroad cars, and most other facilities. Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated facilities had to be equal, this principle was not enforced, and in practice, opportunities for whites and Blacks were starkly different. For example, “Alabama spent \$37 on [schooling for] each white child in 1930 and just \$7 on those who were black.”<sup>2</sup>



“Segregation” (which means enforced separation) was in some ways a misleading term, since African American and white people worked together closely. Black women cleaned and cooked in many white homes and raised many white children. However, all human interactions were structured by race. For example, African American men of any age were routinely referred to as “boy” but expected to address white men as “sir.” Such distinctions were enforced violently. In Alabama alone, at least 340 African Americans were murdered in public by mobs—an act known as lynching—and many Black women were raped by gangs of whites.<sup>3</sup> Often the purpose of such crimes was to enforce white supremacy.

Under segregation, African Americans in Alabama and across the United States built their own institutions, including churches, schools, colleges and universities, businesses, associations, and at least one important labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Meanwhile, more than one million African Americans moved from the rural South to cities, mostly in the North. About one third of Alabama’s African Americans participated in this “Great Migration,” creating pervasive links between Black Alabamans and their family members in the North or West.<sup>4</sup>

The modern civil rights movement was already stirring before the Montgomery bus boycott began. Starting around 1940, the U.S. Supreme Court had issued important rulings against segregation, usually as a result of successful litigation by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and its brilliant founder and legal strategist, Thurgood Marshall. As early as 1942, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) had organized “sit-ins” and other forms of nonviolent civil disobedience. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, African Americans had even conducted a bus boycott similar to the Montgomery bus boycott in 1953.

It is worth discussing these questions: To what degree has the system of white supremacy changed since 1955? To what degree were African Americans better off in the North at that time? And have all the changes since the 1950s been desirable? (For example, 38,000 African American teachers lost their jobs when historically Black and white schools were merged as a result of desegregation.<sup>5</sup>) Nevertheless, it is essential to understand the specific injustices that confronted Blacks in Alabama in 1955, because those were very much on the minds of the activists.

### **Rosa Parks’ Arrest**

When she was arrested, Rosa Parks was already a seasoned activist. She had served as a professional staff member of the Alabama NAACP and had been an active participant in the League of Women Voters. When a young African American woman, Recy Taylor, was gang-raped by white men, Parks had helped to form the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor, a significant effort to combat both white supremacy and violence against women. Parks was employed as a domestic worker by one of the most progressive white families in Montgomery, Clifford and Virginia Durr, who helped her to participate in trainings in nonviolent civil disobedience at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. One of her mentors at Highlander was Septima Clark, often called the “Queen Mother”

or “Grandmother” of the civil rights movement.

On December 1, 1955, Parks boarded a Montgomery bus that was racially segregated by law, with whites seated at the front and Blacks seated at the back. Black female domestic workers predominated as passengers on Montgomery’s buses and were often sexually harassed as they interacted with the white male drivers. Parks sat in the “colored” section but was ordered (with several others) to renounce her seat to a white rider. She refused and was arrested. The charge was refusing to give up a

seat in the “colored” section. Much later, she recalled:

People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.<sup>6</sup>

Parks boarded a Montgomery bus that was racially segregated by law, with whites seated at the front and Blacks seated at the back.

## The Core Activists and their Assets

When Rosa Parks was arrested, she called her mother, who called E.D. Nixon, the president of both the Montgomery branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the state's NAACP chapter. Nixon called Clifford Durr, mentioned above. After Nixon and Durr posted bail for Parks and she agreed to contest her arrest, Nixon made a list of people he would call the next morning, including two young Black pastors, Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King Jr. Meanwhile, someone else called Fred Grey, a Black attorney in town, who, in turn, called Jo Ann Robinson, who was a professor at the local Black university, Alabama State, and the president of the Women's Political Council, an African American women's group. Robinson assembled some of her friends on the Alabama State campus late on the night of Parks' arrest and used the college mimeograph machine (a forerunner of a photocopier) to make flyers announcing a public meeting in support of Parks.

It was Grey who called Robinson, but she had also worked with Nixon and had served as a leader in King's church. These connections are examples of the ties among a network of African American leaders (plus a few supportive whites) in Montgomery. The day after Parks' arrest, about 50 local Black leaders gathered in the basement of King's church to decide what to do next.<sup>7</sup> Most of them probably knew each other already.

Brainstorm the assets that the network collectively possessed. For example, activists could make copies on the Alabama State mimeograph machine and meet undisturbed in several Black churches or a union hall. They had connections with several Black-owned taxi companies that could ferry commuters to work if there was a bus boycott. They had legal expertise and some money. They could turn Montgomery's main white-owned newspaper into an asset by persuading it to report on their activities, thereby spreading information within the Black community. (Nixon did this by meeting in secret with a white reporter.) They also knew who was active in their various congregations, the Porters' union, several associations, and the campus of Alabama State University.

Martin Luther King Jr. might be one of the network's assets. A young pastor who had recently taken over a leading Black church in town, he seemed to have a gift for words and was well connected as the son of one of Atlanta's most prominent African American pastors. Also, he was a newcomer, and Montgomerians felt that he could always leave town again if things went badly. That made him a promising candidate to be the movement's main spokesperson.

The day after Parks' arrest, about 50 local Black leaders gathered in the basement of Martin Luther King's church to decide what to do next.

### ***What other assets did the movement have?***

## The Organizational Structure

When a network of leaders first gathered after Parks' arrest to decide what to do, their natural leader appeared to be Rev. L. Roy Bennett, who was president of the Black minister's group in

Imagine you are meeting in the basement of King's church where Rev. Bennett is dominating the meeting and people are beginning to leave in quiet protest.

Montgomery. This group, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, also looked like the right organization to coordinate any activism.

However, Bennett exasperated most of the other activists by lecturing at length and refusing to share the floor. The other existing Black organizations in Montgomery either had narrow memberships or were vulnerable if they took a prominent role. (For example, Jo Ann Robinson could be fired from Alabama State if the Women's Political Council, which she led, was seen

as too political.) A group of activists decided to create a brand-new association, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). They persuaded a somewhat reluctant King to be its first president and elected Bennett as the vice president.<sup>8</sup>

The MIA's elected officers then met regularly and made key decisions throughout the Montgomery campaign. Thousands of individuals from Montgomery's African American community joined and contributed to the MIA. At mass meetings held in churches, everyone would vote by calling out "aye" or "nay" on such matters as whether to start (or, later, to stop) the bus boycott. However, the board had already decided on a course of action, and the mass votes merely ratified their decisions.

Of course, the organizational structure of the MIA was only one possible form that the organizers could have chosen. Imagine it is the evening after Parks' arrest, and you are meeting in the basement of King's church, where Rev. Bennett is dominating the meeting and people are beginning to leave in quiet protest.

***What organizational structure would you create to make decisions for the movement?***

### Obstacles

Social change is hard, and all movements face obstacles, including their opponents. In this case, the following obstacles faced by organizers in 1955 may require special attention:

- 1) **The difficulty of coordinating:** Before Rosa Parks, other individuals had refused to give up their seats on segregated buses (including a young woman named Claudette Colvin in Montgomery in 1955). Individuals had protested segregation in many other ways as well. However, if one or a few people resisted at a time, they would not make much positive difference, and they would risk violent reprisals. On the other hand, if thousands of people resisted at the same time, they would be safer and they could have a major impact. For example, when thousands of Black Montgomeriesians boycotted the city's buses, they did so safely and defeated the bus company. The obstacle was the difficulty of coordination.



- 2) **Fear and pessimism:** By 1955, Black Americans had experienced 336 years of slavery and then segregation. And, as noted earlier, more than 340 Black Alabamans were publicly executed without trials for allegedly defying segregation. Understandable fear (including fear of death) and doubt were also obstacles to a movement.

### ***What other obstacles would the movement face?***

## **Choices**

The leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott had to make fundamental choices to overcome these obstacles and change their society. Five major choices are described in this section. You can consider choices different from theirs.

### **1. Objectives**

What a movement strives to achieve can be defined as its “objectives.” Various members of a movement may have different objectives, their objectives may change over time, and the movement may not explicitly express all of its goals. Nevertheless, at any given time, a movement typically strives for something, and it has the power to choose that objective.

In the case of the Montgomery bus boycott, the objective sometimes seemed very narrow. The MIA originally wanted to prevent Black bus passengers from having to give up their seats to white passengers when the white section of the bus was full. In other words, they did not originally contest segregation on city buses, just the additional injustice of having to give up seats in the Black section at the back. The NAACP was critical of this objective because it sought to abolish segregation on all transportation and did not want to concede that separate but equal buses could ever be acceptable.

However, even on the night when the MIA voted to boycott buses, Martin Luther King depicted their objective as much deeper and broader than changing who could sit where on buses. He told the mass meeting of the MIA, “We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”<sup>9</sup>

His peers expected King to define the movement’s objective in broad terms and were motivated by similar values. ***But what should the precise objectives of the movement have been at the time?*** Separate but equal services? No more segregation? The end of sexual harassment on buses and other forms of gender bias? The defeat of white supremacy? Equal rights and dignity for all? A combination of these? Or something else?

### **2. Targets**

A movement chooses one or more organizations, agencies, or people as its targets and tries to create costs or difficulties for them in order to advance its objectives.

The MIA targeted the Montgomery City Lines Inc. (the city’s bus company) by organizing a boycott that would cost the company thousands of fares each day.

Other potential targets could have been chosen. For example, during the boycott, Montgomery's police commissioner joined the White Citizens Council, an organization explicitly committed to preserving white supremacy. The commissioner, the police department, or the White Citizens Council could have been chosen as the main target, as could downtown stores or the Democratic Party (which dominated Alabama).

The MIA chose the bus company because they saw a particular vulnerability that they could exploit: the city's buses depended on Black riders who could refuse to ride and find other ways to work.

***Which targets would you choose?***

### **3. Demands**

Whereas the objectives of a movement are what it really wants to accomplish, its demands are what it presents to a specific decision-maker. For example, the MIA told the bus company and the City of Montgomery that Black commuters would go back to riding the city's buses if: 1) Black riders did not have to give up their seats to whites, 2) drivers treated Black passengers courteously, and 3) some Blacks were hired as drivers. These three points were their initial demands.

Meanwhile, Fred Grey and others involved with the MIA sued the city and the bus lines to end all segregation in public transportation. They ultimately won their case.<sup>10</sup> They made different demands in court because a federal lawsuit was a different context from a boycott.

***What demands would you place before which targets?***

### **4. Strategies**

The MIA's main strategy was to organize and sustain a boycott of the city's buses for many months. This required not only persuading thousands of commuters not to ride buses to work but also organizing carpools, van services, and other transportation alternatives that consistently served large numbers of people. King later recalled that many Black car owners immediately volunteered to drive people to work, but "they started out simply cruising the streets of Montgomery with no particular system." At that point, "the real job was just beginning—that of working out some system for these three hundred-odd automobiles, to replace their haphazard movement around the city."<sup>11</sup> The MIA succeeded in creating such a system.

Meanwhile, the MIA sued to end segregation in federal court. When the police indicted 88 leaders of the boycott (including King), these leaders turned themselves in voluntarily and made their imprisonment into an act of nonviolent resistance that brought international media attention to their cause. They also presented their case to reporters and raised money from supporters across the country and overseas.

These were their strategies, but they could have taken other actions instead or as well. Later, the civil rights movement would often violate police or court orders against marching so that the police would arrest them and they would fill jails with thousands of supporters. They used sit-ins, they registered voters, and they held large funeral ceremonies for martyrs. In Memphis in 1968, they organized

a major strike. The civil rights movement could also have employed violence against people or property, although it chose not to.

***What strategies or combinations of strategies would be best?***

## **5. Rhetoric**

The MIA made Martin Luther King Jr. into its main spokesperson, and he gave speeches that are still widely read, as well as many interviews to reporters. Soon after the movement's success in Montgomery, he published a book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, that presented his early views more fully to a global audience.

During the mass meeting that launched the boycott, King described Rosa Parks' recent arrest this way:

Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. And, since it had to happen, I'm happy that it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character. Nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus. And I'm happy since it had to happen, it happened to a person that nobody can call a disturbing factor in the community. Mrs. Parks is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there. And just because she refused to get up, she was arrested.<sup>12</sup>

Like any exercise in public communication, this passage reflects choices. The MIA did not have to choose Martin Luther King as its leader. Rosa Parks could have spoken in addition to King or instead of him. Or King could have spoken about Parks' experience as a militant activist and her long record of fighting sexual violence against Black women. Instead, he chose to emphasize the involuntary nature of her arrest and her Christian faith.

There was much more to King's rhetoric and that of his fellow leaders. During the boycott, King invoked American history, democracy, law, Christianity, and racial justice in very specific ways.

***How would you frame the issues for public audiences?***

## Required Materials

- Episode 1 of “Eyes on the Prize,” *Awakenings*, 1954-1956
- Martin Luther King Jr., “The Montgomery Bus Boycott speech,” Holt Street Baptist Church, December 5, 1955
- Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), chapters 3, 4, and 5

### Optional Additional Materials

- Danielle McGuire, *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (excerpts)
- David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986), pp. 11-82.
- Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, pp. 105-205.

## What Would You Do?

This assignment is written for groups that role-play activists from the civil rights community of Montgomery in 1955. It can be rephrased to be used for groups that evaluate the movement from the present era without role-playing. In either case, it is important to recognize that the real leaders of the movement faced unimaginable obstacles and accomplished world-famous success. We cannot fully grasp their circumstances, and we owe them respect. However, fully respecting them is compatible with thinking critically and creatively about their choices.

Imagine that it is December 1955 and you are the leaders of an emerging social movement in Montgomery, Alabama. What would *you* do?

**Who is in your group? (Your real names)**

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**Your movement's assets:**

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**How will you organize yourselves and make decisions?**

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**Your objectives:**

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**Your targets:**

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**Your demands:**

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**Your strategies:**

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**Your rhetoric:**

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**How do these choices fit together to make one coherent plan?**

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**Anticipate what your opponents will do in response to your actions and explain how you will counter them:**

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Keith S. Hebert, "Slavery," in *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2369>, last updated August 22, 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Irons, "Jim Crow's Schools," <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/summer-2004/jim-crows-schools>, accessed March 18, 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> William Thornton, "More than 300 African-Americans lynched in Alabama in 66 years," [https://www.al.com/news/2018/04/alabamas\\_racial\\_lynching\\_victi.html](https://www.al.com/news/2018/04/alabamas_racial_lynching_victi.html).
- <sup>4</sup> James Gregory, *Alabama Migration History 1850-2017*, <https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/Alabama.shtml>.
- <sup>5</sup> Deirdre Oakley, Jacob Stowell, and John R. Logan. "The Impact of Desegregation on Black Teachers in the Metropolis, 1970–2000." *Ethnic and Racial* 32.9 (2009): 1576-1598.
- <sup>6</sup> Rosa Parks with James Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (Dial Books, 1992), 116.
- <sup>7</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-63* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 28-133; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986), 12-18.
- <sup>8</sup> Garrow, 18-22.
- <sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott speech*, Holt Street Baptist Church, December 5, 1955, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1955-martin-luther-king-jr-montgomery-bus-boycott/>
- <sup>10</sup> *Browder v. Gayle*, 142 F. Supp. 707 (1956).
- <sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 62.
- <sup>12</sup> King, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott speech*. He tells the story in a similar way in *Stride Toward Freedom*, 43-4.