

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded in April 1960, by young people who had emerged as leaders of the sit-in protest movement initiated on February 1 of that year by four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina. Although Martin Luther King, Jr. and others had hoped that SNCC would serve as the youth wing of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#), the students remained fiercely independent of King and SCLC, generating their own projects and strategies. Although ideological differences eventually caused SNCC and SCLC to be at odds, the two organizations worked side by side throughout the early years of the civil rights movement.

The idea for a locally based, student-run organization was conceived when [Ella Baker](#), a veteran civil rights organizer and an SCLC official, invited black college students who had participated in the early 1960 [sit-ins](#) to an April 1960 gathering at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Baker encouraged the more than 200 student attendees to remain autonomous, rather than affiliate with SCLC or any of the other existing civil rights groups. King issued a press statement on the first day of the conference, characterizing the time as “an era of offensive on the part of oppressed people” (*Papers* 5:426). He called on the students to form “some type of continuing organization” and “to delve deeper into the philosophy of nonviolence,” advising: “Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community” (*Papers* 5:427).

At the Raleigh Conference the students were generally reluctant to compromise the independence of their local protest groups, and voted to establish only a temporary coordinating body. Vanderbilt University theology student [James Lawson](#), whose workshops on nonviolent direct action served as a training ground for many of the Nashville student protesters, drafted an organizational statement of purpose that reflected the strong commitment to Gandhian [nonviolence](#) that characterized SNCC’s early years: “We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love” (Lawson, 17 April 1960). In May 1960 the group constituted itself as a permanent organization and Fisk University student [Marion Barry](#) was elected SNCC’s first chairman.

SNCC’s emergence as a force in the southern civil rights movement came largely through the involvement of students in the 1961 [Freedom Rides](#), designed to test a 1960 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in interstate travel facilities unconstitutional. The [Congress of Racial Equality](#) initially sponsored the Freedom Rides that began in May 1961, but segregationists viciously attacked riders traveling through Alabama. Students from Nashville, under the leadership of [Diane Nash](#), resolved to finish the rides. Once the new group of freedom riders demonstrated their determination to continue the rides into Mississippi, other students joined the movement.

By the time the Interstate Commerce Commission began enforcing the ruling mandating equal treatment in interstate travel in November 1961, SNCC was immersed in voter registration efforts in McComb, Mississippi, and a desegregation campaign in Albany, Georgia, known as the [Albany Movement](#). King and SCLC later joined with SNCC in Albany, but tensions arose between the two civil rights groups. The Albany effort, although yielding few tangible gains, was an important site of development for SNCC.

At the August 1963 [March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](#), SNCC chairman [John Lewis](#) was one of those scheduled to speak. He intended to criticize [John F. Kennedy’s](#) proposed civil rights bill as “too little, and too late,” and to refer to the movement as “a serious revolution” (Lewis, 28 August 1963). Lewis softened the tone of the delivered speech to appease [A. Philip Randolph](#) and other march organizers, but, remained adamant that SNCC had “great reservations” regarding Kennedy’s proposed civil right legislation (Carson, 94). He warned his audience: “We want our freedom and we want it now” (Carson, 95).

In 1961 organizer [Bob Moses](#) moved to Jackson, Mississippi, and began organizing young Mississippi residents. Moses, who was firmly committed to non-hierarchical grassroots organizing, joined the SNCC

staff, and became voter registration director of Mississippi's [Council of Federated Organizations](#) the following year. He encountered considerable resistance to civil rights reform efforts, but the Mississippi voter registration effort created conditions for racial reform by bringing together three crucial groups: dynamic and determined SNCC field secretaries, influential regional and local civil rights leaders from Mississippi, and white student volunteers who participated in the "Freedom Vote" mock election of October 1963 and the [Freedom Summer](#) (1964). Early in 1964, SNCC supported the formation of the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](#) in an effort to challenge the legitimacy of the state's all-white Democratic Party.

The voting rights demonstrations that began in 1965 in Selma, Alabama, sparked increasingly bitter ideological debates within SNCC, as some workers openly challenged the group's previous commitment to nonviolent tactics and its willingness to allow the participation of white activists. Distracted by such divisive issues, the day-to-day needs of the group's ongoing projects suffered. In many Deep South communities, where SNCC had once attracted considerable black support, the group's influence waned. Nevertheless, after the [Selma to Montgomery March](#), [Stokely Carmichael](#) and other SNCC organizers entered the rural area between Selma and Montgomery and helped black residents launch the all-black Lowndes County Freedom Organization, later known as the Black Panther Party. Meanwhile, several SNCC workers established incipient organizing efforts in volatile urban black ghettos.

In May 1966 a new stage in SNCC's history began with Carmichael's election as chairman. Because Carmichael identified himself with the trend away from nonviolence and interracial cooperation, his election compromised SNCC's relationships with more moderate civil rights groups and many of its white supporters. During the month following his election, Carmichael publicly expressed SNCC's new political orientation when he began calling for "[Black Power](#)" during a voting rights march through Mississippi. The national exposure of Carmichael's Black Power speeches brought increased notoriety to SNCC, but the group remained internally divided over its future direction. King responded directly to Carmichael's and SNCC's appeal for Black Power in his 1967 book, [Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?](#) King argued, "effective political power for Negroes cannot come through separatism" (King, 48). Opposing exclusive support of black electoral candidates, King continued: "SNCC staff members are eminently correct when they point out that in Lowndes County, Alabama, there are no white liberals or moderates and no possibility for cooperation between the races at the present time. But the Lowndes County experience cannot be made a measuring rod for the whole of America" (King, 49).

Even after the dismissal of a group of SNCC's Atlanta field workers who called for the exclusion of whites, the organization was weakened by continued internal conflicts and external attacks, along with a loss of northern financial backing. The election in June 1967 of H. "Rap" Brown as SNCC's new chair was meant to reduce the controversy surrounding the group. Brown, however, encouraged militancy among urban blacks, and soon a federal campaign against black militancy severely damaged SNCC's ability to sustain its organizing efforts. SNCC became a target of the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#) in a concerted effort at all levels of government to crush black militancy through both overt and covert means.

The spontaneous urban uprisings that followed the [assassination](#) of King in April 1968 indicated a high level of black discontent. However, by then, SNCC had little ability to mobilize an effective political force. Its most dedicated community organizers had left the organization, which changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee. Although individual SNCC activists played significant roles in politics during the period after 1968, and many of the controversial ideas that once had defined SNCC's radicalism had become widely accepted among African Americans, the organization disintegrated. By the end of the decade, FBI surveillance of SNCC's remaining offices was discontinued due to lack of activity.

SOURCES

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Source:

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