

## Your vote counts when you remember Selma

**Anne Power** *marched from Selma half a century ago to protest the unequal treatment of black people in America and to fight for their ability to vote. Ahead of the UK's General Election, she writes that Selma should remind us all that our right to have a say is precious and voting matters.*



Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King, America's black Civil Rights leader, led a dramatic voting rights campaign in the United States in order to win for black people the right to register to vote without hindrance, and to cast their vote as they chose. I was there! And I joined the Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights on its final day as it entered the capital city of Alabama, Montgomery, and reached the State Capitol where Martin Luther King spoke.

Martin Luther King's speech set out the injustice of depriving black people of voting rights, making American democracy a mockery in the eyes of the world. Why did black people's vote matter so much? It shaped who ran the police force, who ran the courts, who was treated right or wrong? Black people being excluded from voting made the police, the courts, the convictions unjust and heavily biased against them. They had to have the right to vote.

If you think things are wrong in this country, but you do not believe you can do much, you can at least cast your vote. Your vote does count. It's only one of 40 million votes, but every single vote, whoever for, proves that what the people think matters and people do care. Young people's votes are particularly important, for they have lost more jobs and more benefits than any other group. They have to pay far more for college and for training than their parents' generation. They are sanctioned far more often by Job Centres and lose public financial support far more frequently. So students need to vote to show you matter and to push your views wherever you can.

Why did I join the Selma March in 1965? I was studying at the University of Wisconsin. I had just come back from over a year in Tanzania, East Africa, and was inspired by the students I taught there, the family that looked after me, and the "new" country that had just gained independence from its colonial rulers, Britain. The people had won their voting rights and it mattered hugely to them and to the future of their country.

I met a black student in Madison, Muriel Hamilton, who had been on the March on Washington in 1964 at which Martin Luther King gave his most famous speech, including the words "I have a dream, that one day my little children (he had 4) will be judged, not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character". In spite of the million marchers on Washington, securing a Civil Rights Act, desegregating buses, lunch counters, public toilets and other public areas, black people in Southern States were often still barred from voting on spurious grounds – inadequate literacy, imperfect knowledge of the constitution, etc.

I was shocked to my core to discover that in the very country that claimed to defend freedom and democracy for the world, millions of black people, descendants of slaves and freed by the Civil War 100 years earlier, still did not have full voting rights. When civil rights workers doing voter registration were murdered and a black church was bombed, killing several children in Sunday School, when Martin Luther King was jailed for attempting to enter the Alabama courthouse and Alabama state police showed a level of brutality, violence and disdain for Civil Rights and black people that shocked the nation and the world, I felt I had to do something.

I helped to organise a bus from the state capital of Wisconsin at Madison to take 35 representatives of all the churches and religious organisations in the city to Selma to join the march. It included a Catholic priest, some Quakers and Jews. The organisers asked us to wait until the Federal Government had agreed to provide the National Guard to protect the marchers, making the march official and limiting the risk of further violence and deaths. They also wanted the bus to represent the churches, as they hoped this would help protect poor black protesters and win more public sympathy.



Alabama civil rights movement: Selma to Montgomery march: Central Baptist church (Monday, March 15, 1965) Credit: [Jack Rabin collection on Alabama civil rights and southern activists, 1941-2004 \(bulk 1956-1974\)](#),

We were warned not to stop in any service station or other eating place on the way – a 24 hour journey – as we'd be too conspicuous and too vulnerable as a potential target. I had to buy twenty loaves of sliced bread, tubs of margarine (to be spreadable), peanut butter, jam, cream cheese, packaged sliced ham, biscuits. I hard-boiled 100 eggs and collected crates of juice and water. American participants did not enjoy my menu very much and begged for hamburgers on the way back! It took us 24 hours on a greyhound bus to reach the Voting Rights march on the road into Montgomery. The bus drivers changed over on the border of the Southern states and I have engraved in my mind the Southern (white) driver's anger when we starting singing Civil Rights songs as we got nearer. I had to beg my now good friends to stop.

The march was a mind-blowing experience. So many black people, young and old, poor and rich, marching, mainly silently, six abreast, while large military tanks along the highway and federal guard helicopters overhead kept watch over the long line of protesters and bystanders. I vividly remember the angry, red faces of the all-white by-standers, with hate particularly directed at the white marchers – in other words us, and people like us. Three civil rights protesters, one black, two white, one a church minister, were killed directly after the march.

As we reached the large mound on the top of which sat the gleaming white State Capitol building, with the confederate flag representing the Deep South and the defence of slavery flying from the steeple, I felt a huge sense of pride and humility – pride to be there and share in such a momentous turning-point in history, humility at my sense of powerlessness as a white foreigner in a country where there was so much injustice.

That sense of powerlessness made me determined to return to England, to give all I could to preventing a similarly unjust outcome in Britain where black people were settling and were not yet treated equally, where poorer white people felt threatened and marginalised; where I hoped every vote would count.

The Selma march changed my life. The following year I went to Chicago, lived in the West Side ghetto, joined Martin Luther King's End Slums Campaign, got directly involved with housing, finished my studies, and came back to London. Here I have been part of many community struggles, helped organise many local community projects, worked in housing, in areas with tense community relations, with families and young people, helped set up a national training centre for tenants, community activists, young people and families. At LSE, where I teach, I feel truly proud that many students have gone on to do great things here, in America and around the world.

Selma should remind us all that our right to have a say is precious and voting matters. Voting is not everything. But the fact that voters, particularly young people, overwhelmingly turned out to vote in the Scottish referendum

last year shook the government to its core. Never since the war have we seen all political parties and all leaders so deeply threatened by a vote. It was young voters who made their heads turn and their hearts thump. Selma 50 years ago changed everything and America has a black president. We can change things.

*Note: The film “[Selma](#)” came out in March 2015. It is a remarkably accurate and deeply moving portrayal of a historic march.*

*This article originally appeared at the LSE’s [British Politics and Policy blog](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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