

## Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (United States)

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The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed in the spring of 1960 to support the student sit-ins against segregation that were sweeping the south. By 1962, the group had metamorphosed into a cadre of activists who combined direct action with political organizing in the most repressive areas of Mississippi and southwest Georgia. Never a membership organization, SNCC (pronounced “Snick”) had 160 staffers at its largest. It lasted only eight years and it could take credit for no landmark civil rights legislation or policy. Yet, then and now, SNCC’s influence far outstripped its size, longevity, or easily measurable accomplishments.

Young, smart, radical, and seemingly fearless, SNCC workers were famous for their willingness to confront Southern apartheid at its starkest, often singing as they were carted off to jail. But their influence came also from their innovative strategies, and these were a result of SNCC’s position at the intersection of two very different activist traditions. SNCC’s founders were tutored in nonviolent direct action by the Gandhian pacifist James Lawson. In campaigns such as the 1961 Freedom Rides, they drew on techniques of passive resistance that had long been used by pacifists, but they stripped direct action of its sober religiosity and made it radical, spontaneous, urgently moral, and effective.

A different tradition came to bear as SNCC moved from direct action to community organizing in 1961–1962. Ella Baker, a former Southern Christian Leadership Conference official, with roots in labor organizing and the cooperative movement, encouraged SNCC activists to work closely with local black

activists. SNCC staffer Bob Moses collaborated with longtime Mississippi activist Amzie Moore to launch voter registration projects in the most repressive areas in the state. The plan was to force the Justice Department to intervene to protect black voting. But just as important, SNCC workers saw their task as helping to build enduring black political organizations.

In 1964, frustrated with the government’s unwillingness to act, a coalition of civil rights groups including SNCC brought upward of 800 mainly white students to the state for the summer to help with voter registration efforts and staff alternative schools. After a white volunteer and two other civil rights workers were abducted and killed, the summer project operated within a glare of national publicity. That publicity continued as the SNCC-created Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenged the National Democratic Party to seat its delegates, rather than the segregationist regular state party, at the national convention.

The Party refused, granting the MFDP only two symbolic seats. Still, the challenge solidified SNCC’s place among the Big Five of the civil rights organizations. Funding and support were now pouring in, yet the organization found itself in turmoil. Disillusionment with self-professed liberal allies and burnout from the rigors of the summer combined with a sense that the influx of white workers was transforming what had been a predominately black organization into something else. Diverse cleavages crystallized in a battle over organizational structure. At a time when northern New Leftists were celebrating SNCC’s consensus-based decision making, many SNCC activists were castigating participatory democracy as ineffectual and self-indulgent.

By the time the battles over organizational form ended, many SNCC workers had left the south altogether and others had shifted their focus from Mississippi to Alabama. There

SNCC workers helped to form an all-black independent county-level party, the Lown-des County Freedom Organization (nicknamed the Black Panther Party). It was in Lown-des County that SNCC's new chair Stokely Carmichael called for "Black Power" on the Meredith March in June 1966. Carmichael's call came after long and contentious discussions within SNCC about the need to focus on black consciousness, organize separately from whites, and renounce nonviolence. However, few within SNCC had a clear sense of what Black Power should involve programmatically. While some staffers championed the publicity that SNCC spokespeople were increasingly garnering on an international stage, others bemoaned the fact that the organization had all but abandoned grassroots organizing for speechmaking. At the same time, increased government surveillance and the loss of funding led many to drift away from the organization. By 1969, when chair H. Rap Brown changed the group's name to the Student National Coordinating Committee, it had little national presence and by 1971 it had stopped operating.

For a small organization with a short lifespan, SNCC's political influence was outsize. It made popular tactics of direct action and community organizing; created, in the MFDP, an organization that would remain central in efforts to gain black electoral representation; inspired a generation's enthusiasm for consensus-based decision making; produced an early salvo in the rise of second wave feminism; and developed influential black cultural projects such as the Free Southern Theater and the Freedom Singers.

SNCC has figured in numerous theories of movement dynamics: in McAdam's theory of

recruitment to high risk activism and in his analysis of the biographical consequences of movement participation; in Morris's theory of the organizational basis of mobilization; in Robnett's account of "bridge leadership" in which women perform essential, if often unrecognized, leadership tasks; in Polletta's analysis of participatory democracy's strengths and weaknesses; and in Evans and Boyte's theory of the role of "free spaces" in spurring protest.

SEE ALSO: Black Power movement (United States); Civil rights movement (United States); Direct action; Consciousness, conscience, and social movements; Freedom Summer (United States).

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