

50 years after 'Bloody Sunday,' where are the Selmas of today?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) President Barack Obama paid respects to his benefactors in Selma, Ala., on Saturday, 50 years after the incident at the foot of the Edmund Pettus bridge, where white Alabama state troopers beat black people who had gathered to protest a police shooting and to demand a full franchise.

The shocking images at a bridge named after a Ku Klux Klan grand dragon woke the country up to a human and constitutional injustice being perpetrated. The violence and a march two weeks later, led by Martin Luther King Jr., tipped the hand of President Lyndon Johnson, who signed the Voting Rights Act just a few months after the "Bloody Sunday" events in 1965.

When the U.S. Supreme Court largely gutted the act in 2013, Chief Justice John Roberts noted that Congress has to use contemporary data when placing restrictions on nine states, mostly in the South, that need to get federal preclearance before changing voting laws.

"Our country has changed," Roberts said.

Yet given recent events, it's clear to many other people that America hasn't completely changed, and that Americans, in Selma, "keep coming back to a place that none of us can escape," as former *New York Times* reporter Gay Talese, who reported from Selma on "Bloody Sunday," put it in an essay.

In particular, the black struggle for full acceptance can be seen today in three unique locales—Ferguson, Mo., Raleigh, N.C., and, yes, Selma, Ala.

The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson was not ultimately deemed a civil rights concern—the U.S. Department of Justice declined to press charges against Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot Mr. Brown.

Yet the images of a militant police crackdown on a new, angrier generation of protesters immediately drew comparisons to “Bloody Sunday. “It’s clear that the struggle continues,” human rights attorney Nicole Lee, who has been involved in the Ferguson aftermath, told an AP reporter in Selma.

But Ferguson has also come to embody a subsection of African-American voters who largely failed to use the voter franchise won at Selma to have their interests and complaints heard to address racial problems in their community.

“Now our task is to work together to solve the problem and not get caught up in the cynicism that says this is never gonna change because everybody’s racist,” President Obama told students at Benedict College in South Carolina, as he answered questions about Ferguson.

In Raleigh, N.C., many Americans have come to embody the spirit of Selma with the so-called “Moral Monday” movement—a weekly exercise of nonviolent protest [in which a major leader is William Barber II, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor] that has resulted in over 1,000 arrests, and saw a total of 80,000 people march against perceived injustices—the largest demonstration in the South since the Selma to Montgomery marches.

Particularly, the protests have focused on new voter ID restrictions passed by the a new, largely rural conservative majority that critics claim is a voter suppression tactic aimed at black people.

The Government Accounting Office found last year that states that implemented voter ID laws saw black and youth voter turnout drop disproportionately. Other states, including Georgia, have seen minority turnout increase, even in mid-term elections. In the 2012 elections, Politifact found that it's true that states with the toughest voter ID laws had higher minority turnout than turnout by whites. In North Carolina, 172,000 white voters and 107,000 black voters don't have the appropriate identification to vote under the new rules, which take effect in 2016.

In Missouri, where there is no photo ID requirement to vote, black voter rates are low. In Ferguson, only 1,484 of the largely black town's 12,096 registered voters cast a ballot in the last local election

And even as Obama prepared to speak from the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Saturday amid a five-day celebration of Selma's impact on America, the town

that became emblematic of the black struggle “has its own bridges yet to cross,” writes *Birmingham News* columnist Staci Brooks, who was born and raised in Selma.

What Brooks calls “the mecca of voting rights” mustered only 40 percent turnout in last year’s election, comparable to statewide turnout hovering at the lowest point since the 1970s. “The new enemy—apathy—is far more entrenched,” Brooks wrote.

Talese wrote in his report from Alabama, “Even in 2015, it can be hard to tell what year we’re in . . . The Selma Country Club, where I watched the members hiss at the television in 1965, still has no black members. Selma High School, about a third white during the 25th [Selma] anniversary, is now all black and other students of color.”

The specter of segregation and poverty in Selma dovetails with national concerns over unequal justice for blacks, offering a sense that America can’t quite shake the burden of race. As singer-songwriter John Legend suggested as he picked up the Oscar for his contribution to the movie named for the town: “Selma is now.”