



## JOHN LEWIS

Members of the Press.

My name is John Lewis. Born the son of sharecroppers on February 21, 1940, I was raised on my family's farm in Alabama. When I grew up, states and counties in the South had "Jim Crow Laws" that required segregation in public places like buses, schools, and restaurants—meaning that black people and white people couldn't be there together or use the same facilities.

Some of the Jim Crow Laws made it difficult or impossible for black people, and especially poor black people, to exercise their right to vote. For example, there were poll tax laws, which were written in a way that seemed neutral, but in reality applied only to black men and women. They required us to pay special taxes in order to vote in state or local elections; many of us couldn't afford to pay, which meant we could not vote. Fortunately, the United States Supreme Court declared poll taxes illegal in 1966. Other laws required that we take literacy tests before being allowed to vote. Even if they could get to the testing place, which was frequently very far away and only open once a month, a lot of poor people couldn't pass the extremely difficult tests, and couldn't vote as a result.

Finally, beyond the laws, there was a lot of intimidation. Black people who tried to register to vote would be intimidated by threats that they could lose their jobs, be evicted from their homes, or worse—get badly hurt or killed. You could see the result of all of this in my hometown in Alabama. At one point, the county's population was 80 percent black, but there wasn't a single black registered voter.

Even as a very young man, I knew that the vote "is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have in a democratic society." I used my position as the Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which organized college students' participation in the Civil Rights Movement, to fight for the equal right to vote for all American citizens. We organized voter registration drives throughout the South, such as the Freedom Summer of 1964 in Mississippi. The following year, on March 7, 1965, Hosea Williams and I led a march of 600 peaceful protesters to the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, to demonstrate for voting rights. While crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we were attacked by Alabama state police troopers in a confrontation known as Bloody Sunday. I was beaten so badly that my skull was broken. I was also arrested—this was one of the 40 times I've been arrested. We didn't back down, though. With the protection of National Guard troops called out by President Lyndon Johnson, we made it to Montgomery three weeks after Bloody Sunday, and 25,000 people joined our demonstration at the state capitol in support of voting rights.

When people across the country saw news reports and photographs of our demonstrations, and especially the violent response, the tide turned and they supported action to protect voting rights and fight segregation. I'm proud to say that Congress, urged by President Johnson, passed the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965 shortly after.

I will now take your questions.