# Title of Lesson: Role of Citizens in Montgomery Bus Boycott

## Lesson By: Laurie Hughes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/Duration of Lesson:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/Humanities</td>
<td>30-35 students</td>
<td>1 or 2 100 minutes lessons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Guiding Questions:
- What is role of average citizens in movements of social change?
- How were the Montgomery citizens essential to the success of the bus boycott?

## Lesson Abstract:
This lesson provides students with the opportunity to understand that for social change to happen there needs to be more than a few charismatic leaders. They will learn how change occurred in Montgomery because of the determination and sacrifices of thousands of citizens. They will learn about the Women’s Political Caucus, Jo Ann Robinson and many others who were key to this critical movement in the Civil Rights movement.

## Lesson Content:
While Rosa Parks was clearly an integral person in the civil rights movement, it is essential that students understand that there were others before her who had set the stage for her momentous decision. Before Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on December 1, 1955, earlier in that year, Claudette Colvin, a 15 year old, and Mary Louise Smith, a 18 year old, were also arrested for refusing to relinquish their seats to white citizens on a Montgomery bus. In addition to the young women’s actions, the Women’s Political Caucus (WPC) had been trying to change the segregated bus system since the mid-1940s. They had met with the Mayor and sent letters articulating their strong beliefs against the unjust system. Some people felt that Rosa Parks was a strong candidate for a citywide campaign because of her positive standing in the community, but another viewpoint would be that because others had set the groundwork for her action the time was ripe for thousands of people to be catapulted into active resistance of the segregated system of the South.

Change would not have occurred in Montgomery, without the immediate response of many people in the community. Jo Ann Robinson, a professor at Alabama State College, with the help of the WPC, quickly published and distributed leaflets that requested that all African-Americans boycott the buses on the next day. Large numbers of people gathered in the local churches to hear their religious leaders give their vocal support to the boycott. Clearly the boycott would only be effective if the majority of African-Americans refused to ride the buses. Could the leaders so quickly count on the support of their community members? The leaders, who included Martin Luther King, Jr., were optimistically hoping for at least 60 percent participation in the boycott, but to King’s amazement there was almost 100 percent participation. King reflected on the first day of the strike, by stating that “I knew there is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity (Carson, 1998, pg 55). He was moved by the young students who were thumbing for rides to school and by the older women who were walking many miles in their worn out shoes. While King was instrumental in inspiring the people to stay involved in the noncooperation campaign, he deeply understood that without his fellow citizens, the
movement would not move forward.

African-Americans from all parts of the community were able to continue the boycott for 13 months with fierce determination that would propel the civil rights campaign into a new phase. At the beginning of the boycott, African-American taxi drivers were giving rides for the ten cent bus fare. Soon the city threatened to revoke their licenses, so the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), created to organize the boycott, set up a complex system of “forty-eight dispatch and the forty-two pick-up stations” (Carson, 1998, pg 65). For every challenge they faced from the bus company or the local government, the boycotters were able to muster the courage, resources and determination to keep the acts of civil disobedience alive. When they asked for volunteers to help with driving people to work at the first meeting, more than a hundred and fifty people immediately offered their services. Many ministers spent their days driving people in the morning and afternoons. In addition, they repeated the message of the boycott from their pulpits, gathering support and new volunteers. Even some white women who were concerned about losing their domestic workers drove their maids to work and home. People continued to attend the mass meetings at the churches, so the momentum of the boycott would not lessen. “The act of walking, for many, had become of symbolic importance (Carson, 1998, pg 65). These individual actions, not only enabled the boycott to last for 381 days, but empowered people throughout Montgomery to see that their voices did count and they could end the system of segregated buses.

To successfully continue the boycott, the MIA needed to form committees to maintain the boycott for over a year. They created a transportation committee, a finance committee, a program committee and an executive committee that could make critical decisions. The names of these people are not commonly listed in history books, but without their participation the boycott could not have continued. People like Jo Ann Robinson, who was already busy with her job as a professor at Alabama State College, sat on the executive committee and spent her days transporting people to work and home. People like E.D. Nixon who was the state and local president of the NAACP were needed to help strategize and to participate in critical negotiations with the mayor and the bus owners. Money was needed to pay for bail and other legal expenses, transportation, media outreach, and simple items as coffee and tea for the meetings. As mentioned earlier, as the myriad needs of the boycott arose, people stepped forward to help.

Often historic movements are romanticized by historians and students, and future generations lose the understanding of the day to day trials that people suffered in the hopes of changing society for the better. It is necessary to try to visualize the women who were willing to walk ten or twelve miles a day for 381 days in order to be able to have a seat on the Montgomery bus, but more importantly to earn the dignity that they and their future generations deserved as human beings. Not only did people make physical sacrifices, but there was also the daily psychological fear of arrest or violence. After decades of living under the oppression of the Jim Crow system, African-Americans were keenly aware of the potential danger to their lives because of their participation in the boycott. Martin Luther King Jr.’s home was bombed during this time. The tension increased when in early February of 1956, the Montgomery County Grand Jury determined that the boycott violated an old statute prohibiting any boycotts. People were now fearful of mass arrests and 89 people were arrested, including Martin Luther King, Jr.
Even under this duress, the boycott continued.

After a very long boycott, on November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court declared the segregation of city buses to be unconstitutional. This was a momentous occasion for the forty thousand African-Americans who had made multiple types of sacrifices for justice. The next day, “Eight thousand men and women who crowded in and around the two churches were in high spirits” (Carson, 1998, pg. 94). While the African-Americans rejoiced, the Ku Klux Klan decided to make their feelings heard about the judicial decision that began the dismantling of the Jim Crow Laws. The response by the African-American community to the trucks of Klan members who were determined to push the African-Americans back into a state of fear of intimidation were met by “Negroes [who] behaved as though they watching a circus parade. Concealing the effort it cost them, many walked about as usual; some simply watched from their steps; a few waved at the passing cars”(Carson, 1998, pg 95). The Klan realized that their ability to easily threaten the African-Americans had diminished and they road away without causing any physical harm to anyone. This was a critical piece of the civil rights movement which enabled African-Americans to see the power of their voice and their ability to overcome the racist intimidation within their community.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a critical step in creating a powerful force that would nonviolently bring an end to segregation in the United States. Without the participation of thousands of average citizens, the boycott would never have succeeded. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words eloquently described the importance of this victory. “Ultimately, victory in Montgomery came with the United States Supreme Court’s decision; however, in a real sense, the victory had already come to the boycotters, who had proven to themselves, the community, and the world that Negroes could join in concert and sustain collective action against segregation, carrying it through until the desired objective was reached. In conclusion, then, Montgomery gave forth, for all the world to see, a courageous new Negro” (Carson, 1998, pg 99).

Through studying the Montgomery Bus Boycott, students will see the ability of communities to come together to create social change. The charisma and actions of the Martin Luther King Jr.s, the Rosa Parks, the Malcolm Xs are definitely an integral part of a social movement, but a few individuals cannot cause a paradigm shift. These stories of sacrifice by thousands of individuals show students that they are capable of bringing justice into their communities.

**California State Content Standards:**

Grade Eleven History and Social Science Standards
11.10 Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights.

**Materials Needed:**
- Paper and writing instruments
- If including a research component, students will need access to a library and/or internet.

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
- The lesson should start with asking students to write about whom comes to mind when
they hear the words: Civil Rights Movement.

- Ask students to share their answers. Most likely they will say Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez. Feel free to add any names to their list.
- Then ask students if these people are the only ones who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Eventually the students will see that the leaders needed the support of the community to succeed.
- Review with the students the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, asking them to focus on the various people who were essential to its success. Students should take notes and share information at the end of the lecture.
- After students have shared their knowledge of the boycott, have students share the names and groups of people who were active in the boycott. Create a list on the board.
- Ask students to respond in writing to Margaret Mead’s quote: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”
- Another possible prompt could ask the students to write about how they would gain support from others for a social justice movement.
- Possible second or third day lesson: Ask students to research particular people or groups in the Montgomery bus boycott. Possible topics could be Jo Ann Robinson, WPC, MIA, E.D. Nixon, Juliette Morgan, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and Ralph Abernathy. Students could share information with the class on the next day.

**Bibliography:**
