The [United States House of Representatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_of_Representatives) has had 153 elected [African-American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Americans) members, of whom 147 have been representatives from U.S. states and 6 have been [delegates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-voting_members_of_the_United_States_House_of_Representatives) from [U.S. territories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territories_of_the_United_States) and the [District of Columbia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington,_D.C.).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_African-American_United_States_Representatives#cite_note-1) The House of Representatives is the [lower house](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_house) of the [bicameral](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bicameralism) [United States Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Congress), which is the [legislative branch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislature) of the [federal government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_government_of_the_United_States) of the [United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States). [Joseph Rainey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Rainey) (left) and [Shirley Chisholm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirley_Chisholm) (right) are, respectively, the first African American and woman to serve in the [United States House of Representatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_of_Representatives).

John Robert Lewis was an American politician, statesman, and civil rights activist and leader who served in the United States House of Representatives for Georgia's 5th congressional district from 1987 until his death in 2020. Lewis ran for office himself in 1981, winning a seat on the Atlanta City Council. In 1986, he was elected to the [House of Representatives](http://www.history.com/topics/history-of-the-house-of-representatives) and as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, he was one of the most respected members of Congress and he continued to fight for people's rights. Since entering office, he has called for healthcare reform, measures to fight poverty and improvements in education. Most importantly, he oversaw multiple renewals of the Voting Rights Act.

John Robert Lewis was born outside of Troy, Alabama, on February 21, 1940. Lewis had a happy childhood — though he needed to work hard to assist his sharecropper parents — but he chafed against the unfairness of segregation. He was particularly disappointed when the [Supreme Court](http://www.history.com/topics/supreme-court-facts) ruling in 1954's [*Brown v. The Board of Education*](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/brown-v-board-of-education-of-topeka) didn't affect his school life. John Lewis grew up in an era of racial segregation. Inspired by [Martin Luther King Jr.](https://www.biography.com/activist/martin-luther-king-jr), and news of the 1955-56 [Montgomery bus boycott](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/montgomery-bus-boycott) he joined the burgeoning [civil rights movement](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement) to act for the changes he wanted to see. During the civil rights struggle, Lewis was arrested approximately 40 times.

In 1957, Lewis left Alabama to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee. There, he learned about nonviolent protest and helped to organize sit-ins at segregated lunch counters. He was arrested during these demonstrations, which upset his mother, but Lewis was committed to the civil rights movement and went on to participate in the Freedom Rides of 1961.

Freedom Riders challenged the segregated facilities they encountered at interstate bus terminals in the South, which had been deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. It was dangerous work that resulted in arrests and beatings for many involved, including Lewis.

In 1963, Lewis became chairman of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/sncc). That same year, as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the civil rights movement, he helped plan the March on Washington. Lewis — the youngest speaker at the event — had to alter his speech in order to please other organizers, but still delivered a powerful oration that declared, "We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about."

After the March on Washington, in 1964, the Civil Rights Act became law. However, this did not make it easier for African Americans to vote in the South. To bring attention to this struggle, Lewis and Hosea Williams led a [march from Selma to Montgomery](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/selma-montgomery-march), Alabama, on March 7, 1965. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the marchers were attacked by state troopers. Lewis was severely beaten once more, this time suffering a fractured skull.

The violent attacks were recorded and disseminated throughout the country, and the images proved too powerful to ignore. "[Bloody Sunday](https://www.history.com/news/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement)," as the day was labeled, sped up the passage of [1965's Voting Rights Act](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/voting-rights-act).

Lewis left the SNCC in 1966. Though devastated by the assassinations of King and [Robert Kennedy](https://www.biography.com/political-figure/robert-kennedy) in 1968, Lewis continued his work to enfranchise minorities. In 1970, he became director of the Voter Education Project. During his tenure, the VEP helped to register millions of minority voters.

## Legacy

Though the Supreme Court's decision about the Voting Rights Act was a blow to Lewis, he has been encouraged by the progress that has occurred in his lifetime. After [Barack Obama](https://www.biography.com/us-president/barack-obama) won the presidency in 2008, Lewis stated that "When we were organizing voter-registration drives, going on the Freedom Rides, sitting in, coming here to Washington for the first time, getting arrested, going to jail, being beaten, I never thought — I never dreamed — of the possibility that an African American would one day be elected president of the United States."

In addition to his work in Congress, Lewis reached a younger generation by helping to create a series of graphic novels about his work in the civil rights movement. In 2016, he won the National Book Award for the third installment in the series March: Book Three, which marks the first time a graphic novel has received the honor.

The civil rights icon has also been honored with numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011, the NAACP's Spingarn Medal and the sole [John F. Kennedy](https://www.biography.com/us-president/john-f-kennedy) "Profile in Courage Award" for Lifetime Achievement.

In December 2019, Lewis announced that he had been diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020.