

Background on Democracy and Voting: Supplemental Teaching Notes for Voting Rights and Wrongs

Democracy is a form of government where eligible people have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. In a **direct democracy**, each eligible person has a vote when decisions are being made that will affect their lives. In a **representative democracy**, people vote for the people who will make these decisions. This is different from other forms of government where a leader has either taken power or been given power to govern the people without the people having a say on what will happen.

Some democracies and other forms of government operate under a written **constitution**, or a set of rules and agreements that define how the government works and what role, if any, people in the country have in choosing their laws and who governs them. A constitution may or may not represent the interests of all the people. Even in a democracy, sometimes women, religious groups and other minorities may not have the right to vote, or they live in fear that it will be taken away from them.

Many countries are engaged in political or military struggles to determine who will make the decisions that affect people's everyday lives. Some people in these countries want to live in a democracy and have a say in who their leaders are and what laws they have. Often democracy is a promise we must continue to work for and a right that can be lost. In 2010, the United Nations declared Sept. 15 the International Day of Democracy to recognize the importance of forms of government that promote equal rights and democratic principles.

Democracy has its own challenges. Many democracies limit who is eligible to vote. Individuals who are eligible to vote may feel their vote does not really matter. Democracies can right their own wrongs if people are willing to work for change and support equal rights. The U.S. Constitution was written by a small group of white men, but includes language that supports broader democratic principles. This language was used to extend the right to vote to different groups and to establish constitutional amendments and laws protecting the rights of women, racial minorities, individuals with disabilities, senior citizens and others.

The history of voting in the United States reflects our long and often bitter struggle to give more groups the right to vote and have a say in who governs and in choosing the laws that shape all of our lives. This struggle is reflected in the Voting Rights and Wrongs Timeline that is included with this lesson.

Questions and Discussion Points

What is the difference between a direct democracy and a representative democracy? Imagine that the members of your class were their own small country. Give some examples of how your government would work if you operated in a direct democracy and then as a representative democracy.

Do you know some other forms of government? What is a monarchy? What is a dictatorship?

What do you see as some of the challenges of a democracy? Can you give some examples from the news or history?

Look at the Voting Rights and Wrongs timeline. Who votes now who did not vote in the past? This summary documents some of the groups that had to advocate to gain or reclaim the right to vote. What surprised you in the timeline?

Word Meanings to Consider

govern — To rule, control or direct.

government — An organization or body that rules, controls or directs a city, state or nation.

-ment — the act or process of.

democracy — a form of government directly or indirectly run by the people and intended to provide equal rights to those recognized as citizens.

rescind — take back.

slavery or involuntary servitude — being forced to work for someone else while being denied personal rights or protections and treated as property under the law.

suffrage — the right to vote in political elections.

franchise — the right to vote.

guardianship — authority to make decisions for or on behalf of another person who is considered unable to do so.

citizen — a person who legally belongs to a country and has the rights and protection of that country.

naturalized citizen — one who came from another country and lawfully becomes a citizen of the United States.

constitutional amendment — a change or alteration to the U.S. Constitution, whether a modification, deletion or addition.