

LESSON — Voting Rights and Wrongs

Unit: Gaining Our Rights

Focus: Diversity and Disability, Civil Rights

Grade Level: 5–12

Subject(s): Social Studies, Civics, English Language Arts

Overview

This lesson is designed for use with civics and history units on civil rights and U.S. history. Students learn about the gradual expansion of the franchise (voting rights) in the United States.

Learning Objectives

- Students will gain a basic understanding of the importance of citizenship and voting rights in a democracy.
- Students will be able to evaluate and present historical arguments for and against the expansion of voting rights to specific groups.
- Students will understand, analyze and be able to present the relationship of voting rights to the history of the United States and the U.S. Constitution.

Standards

Obtain, synthesize and report findings clearly and effectively in response to task and purpose.

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Conduct research based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of subject under investigation.

Present information, findings and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning.

Materials and Preparation

- Voting Rights and Wrongs Timeline.
- Activity Sheet: Can You Vote?
- Video from Vermont Secretary of State: “Every Citizen’s Right to Vote.”
- Essay templates for supplemental writing activities.

- Supplemental background information (questions and definitions for teachers to use).

Time: Two to three sessions (with optional activities).

Setting: Classroom.

Preparation

Review materials provided and integrate into any existing lesson plans for civics, history or social studies class. An introductory homework assignment is offered below but it can be changed or adapted to better fit with class activities and learning goals.

Directions

First Session (10-20 minutes): Ask if anyone has attended town meeting or watched people line up to vote in a local, state or national election. If relevant to your class this is a good time to review the purpose of a government and a constitution in a democracy, definitions and examples of direct and indirect democracy, and the role of voting in both forms of democracy. For homework, suggest that students ask family members or friends their opinion on voting and what voting issues are important to them or ask them to look for news stories and other media reports on voting and report back on one story: What issue is being covered and why is it considered newsworthy? What questions about who can vote and how we vote are in the news?

Second Session

Homework Review (5-10 minutes): Ask students to share their findings.

Voting Rights and Wrongs Activity (20 minutes): Explain that voting is a constitutional right in the United States but who can vote has changed over time and may continue to change. Hand out or present the Voting Rights and Wrongs Timeline to the class. Have students work individually or in small groups to review the timelines and answer Who Can Vote questions.

Follow-up Discussion and/or Writing Activity (10 minutes or more): Have students present their work and answer a few questions in class or in a writing assignment: What information was new to you? What surprised you? Which groups had to win the right to vote? Which groups are still denied this right? Can you give examples of social or legal barriers that have limited people's right to vote? What do you feel about what you have learned?

This lesson and the Voting Rights and Wrongs activity can lead to further research, discussion and presentation or writing activities on civil rights movements and on who votes and how we vote today, including any concerns about equal access to the vote for individuals with disabilities and others.

Optional Activities

Art Activity: Use the timeline and online resources to identify images, quotes and other text to create a Voting Rights and Wrongs collage.

Writing Activity: Read and discuss the Ragged Edge Online exchange between Frank Bowe and Naomi Ortiz, found under the heading “The Time to Rise Will Come Again.” Consider the question of whether people organize for rights when they are fed up or when there is some reason to hope that change is possible. Write a journal entry or essay supporting one of these two positions using examples from Voting Rights and Wrongs Timeline and related civil rights history. Alternatively, do this same exercise using examples from current news coverage of existing voting restrictions.

“Voting Rights and Wrongs:” Use this video to review voting rights in Vermont. Ask students to take notes on voting rights information from the video. Let students know about two changes that have happened since the video was created:

- 1) There is no longer a 30-day window for early ballot voting — voting can begin as soon as the ballots are available. (The printing deadline for the primary and general is 45 days and for local elections 20 days, but if they are printed early there is nothing stopping anyone from voting before these days).
- 2) All our ballots now look the same. (There are no longer three kinds of ballots).

Resources

Learn about the history of voting at [PBS Kids Democracy Project](#). Clearly written facts on laws and voting rights can also be found at kids.laws.com/.

An online civics resource for teachers has voting activities and an interactive online legislative simulation called E-Congress at <http://youthleadership.net>.

The Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement website has a great timeline of voting rights history: <http://www.crmvet.org/info/votehist.htm>

Mother Jones has an article on the issue of voting and guardianship available online at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/11/voting-rights-mental-disabilities>

News 21’s voting news center, “Who Can Vote?” profiles reports on voting challenges that some groups experience today and lets you check your state’s voting requirements: <http://votingrights.news21.com/>. One story addresses a disability-related challenge: ["Disabled and elderly voters face a new ID hurdle at polls."](#)

Several resources on voting experiences of people with disabilities can be found at [Ragged Edge Online](#).

The Records of Rights Vote, part of the National Archives Museum, highlights the Americans with Disabilities Act and other examples of civil rights protections gained through votes. See the [Records of Rights Vote](#).