Lesson Overview

This lesson challenges students to compare their assumptions for voting requirements from Lesson 1 with the actual voting requirements set by selected amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Students learn how limited the voting population was in our early history as a nation and how constitutional amendments have guaranteed the right to vote for many more citizens. Students also identify groups who cannot vote and discuss their opinions.

Suggested Grade Level

Elementary (Grades 5–6)

Estimated Time to Complete

50 minutes

Lesson Objectives: After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- understand how voting was limited in the early United States,
- explain how the suffrage amendments advanced voting rights in the United States,
- understand the voting rights established by the U.S. Constitution,
- explain the effect of suffrage amendments on voting rights, and
- explain what groups cannot vote and why.

Vocabulary

- amendment
- citizen
- enfranchisement
- grandfather clause
- literacy test
- poll tax
- suffrage
• Voting Rights Act of 1965

Materials Needed

Teacher Resources

• Two poster board charts: “Who Could Not Vote in Early America?” and “Who Can Vote Today?”
• Quick Vocabulary (Teacher Resource 1)
• Suffrage Amendments Added to the U.S. Constitution (Teacher Resource 2)

Student Handouts

• Who Can Vote in the United States? (Student Handout 1)
• Building Our Vocabulary (Student Handout 2)
• Suffrage Amendments: In Your Own Words (Student Handout 3)

Before the Lesson

• Prepare two poster board charts: “Who Could Not Vote in Early America?” and “Who Can Vote Today?”
• Review Teacher Resource 1 and 2. Students should come to class with Student Handout 1 and 2. Review and copy Student Handout 3.
• Inform students that they will be picking up Student Handout 3 as they enter the classroom. Assign a student to monitor this process.

Lesson Procedure

1. Voting in the Early United States

Inform students that the highest law of the land, the Constitution, mentioned nothing about voting qualifications at the time of its adoption. This omission left voting qualifications up to each individual state. As a result, voting qualifications varied greatly among the states. Most states granted the right to vote only to men who were free, white, twenty-one years old or older, and property owners.

Use the poster board chart, “Who Could Not Vote in Early America?” Based on your explanation about who could vote in the early United States, ask students to identify who could not vote. As each correct answer is given, add it to the chart.

2. Building Our Vocabulary

Ask students to take out Student Handout 2, which they began completing in Lesson 1. Ask for the definitions for enfranchisement and suffrage learned in Lesson 1. Tell students that they will be adding more vocabulary definitions in this lesson. As each term comes up in the lesson, write the term and definition on the board or create a vocabulary list on chart paper.
3. Compare and Contrast: What Voting Rights Have Been Added to the Constitution?

For this part of the lesson, you will need Teacher Resource 1 and 2 and Student Handouts 2 and 3. Students will learn how voting rights have been extended by selected suffrage amendments to the Constitution. Remind students that the Constitution did not originally guarantee voting rights or establish voting requirements and that voting requirements were left up to the states. Tell students that some states continued to find ways to deny the right to vote to certain citizens.

- Ask students what the term *citizen* means to them. Define the term and have students enter it on their vocabulary handout (Student Handout 2).
- Ask students whether voting rights are guaranteed for citizens today.
  - Students may know several voting rights guaranteed by the Constitution.
- Ask students how these voting rights exist if the Constitution did not originally guarantee them.
  - Students may know that amendments have been added to the Constitution.
- Define the term *amendment*.
- Explain to students that it took several constitutional amendments to accomplish enfranchisement. These amendments gave suffrage rights to more citizens.

Refer the class to Student Handout 3: Suffrage Amendments: In Your Own Words. Review the directions for the handout with the students. Inform the students that you will be calling on them to read each amendment aloud. When the class discusses each amendment, tell students to write the meaning of the amendment in their own words in the space provided.

Project Teacher Resource 2 onto a screen so that all the students can see it. Call on students to read each amendment aloud to the class. A different student should read each amendment. Ask the class how each amendment extends enfranchisement and suffrage rights. Tell the students that they should be able to identify changes or additions to the Constitution pertaining to voting. If students are having difficulty with an amendment, clarify the wording and help them reach an explanation.

Once a clear explanation is reached, tell students to write what the amendment means to them in the space provided.

Vocabulary terms associated with the amendments should be defined and added to the class chart and student vocabulary list.

Here are some suggested discussion points:

- **Fourteenth Amendment**—Citizenship
  - Ask students whether this amendment says that voting rights are included.

- **Fifteenth Amendment**—Racial equality in voting
  - Why was this amendment needed after the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified?
  - Were there other ways states denied certain people the right to vote?
• grandfather clauses
• literacy tests
• poll taxes
  ▪ How do you think these restrictions were overcome?
    ▪ *Suggestion:* Introduce students to the Voting Rights Act of 1965

• Nineteenth Amendment—Suffrage for women
  ▪ Why do you think it took so many years to attain the right to vote for women?

• Twenty-fourth Amendment—Poll tax abolished
  ▪ What is a poll tax?
  ▪ What Americans were most affected by the poll tax?
  ▪ What Americans benefited the most from this amendment?
    ▪ *Suggestion:* Mention literacy tests and grandfather clauses as additional requirements that some states imposed to keep certain groups of citizens from voting.
  ▪ How do you think these restrictions were overcome?
    ▪ *Suggestion:* Introduce students to the Voting Rights Act of 1965

• Twenty-sixth Amendment—the right of eighteen-year-olds to vote
  ▪ Note that this amendment was ratified in 1971
  ▪ What was happening in the United States at this time?
    ▪ The Vietnam War and antiwar protests
  ▪ Why do you think the Twenty-sixth Amendment was passed at this particular time in our history?

4. Using Your Knowledge

Ask students the following questions:

• How would your new knowledge of suffrage amendments change your group’s Student Handout 1 responses?
  ▪ You or the student groups’ reporters can read back the original responses.

• For how many years has the United States been adding voting rights to its Constitution?

• After nearly 150 years of voting rights being added to the Constitution, can you think of any other group that has not been considered?

• Are there any other qualifications to vote?
  ▪ Students may know about residency and other state qualifications.

5. Concluding the Lesson: Who Can Vote Today?

Use the poster board chart, “Who Can Vote Today?” Ask students to list categories of citizens who can today vote according to what they have learned about suffrage amendments.
Ask students if there might be other restrictions on voting and what they might be. Students may mention that noncitizens and people under eighteen years old may not vote.

Inform students that the next Citizens, Not Spectators lesson will explain state requirements to vote and how to register to vote. Tell students that they will be referring to Student Handout 1 again in the next lesson.