Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 1: Who Can Vote in the United States?

Teacher Resource 1: Quick Vocabulary

amendment A change to the U.S. Constitution or the constitution of a state. Voters must approve any changes to a constitution.

abstain To refuse to exercise the right to vote.

citizen A person who is a member of a nation.

democracy A form of government in which power is held by the people. The people exercise their power either directly or through elected representatives.

direct democracy A form of government in which the people themselves meet and make the laws that they decide are needed.

enfranchisement Giving the vote to a person or a group of people.

federal government This is another name for our national government.

federal system A form of government in which power is divided among a central government and state and local governments.

grandfather clause A law that stated that a person could vote if his grandfather had been allowed to vote. It made it possible for white people to vote even if they could not pass a literacy test because their grandfathers had the right to vote. It also made it impossible for African Americans to vote because their grandfathers had not been allowed to vote.

independent voter A person who chooses to register to vote with no party affiliation. This choice is made on a registration to vote card. The decision to register as an independent voter
does not register a voter with any third party although these third parties are often referred to as independent parties. In some states registered independent voters cannot participate in primary elections.

**initiative** A proposed law that voters can place on the ballot in some states. If the initiative is passed, it will become a law or constitutional amendment.

**literacy test** A test given to people to prove they are able to read and write. These tests were used in the South to keep African Americans from voting.

**majority rule** A principle of democracy that the greater number of citizens in any political unit should select officials and determine policies. Majority rule is one of the most important principles of democracy but is not always practiced in societies that value consensus.

**minority rights** The principle of a constitutional democracy that government elected by a majority must respect the basic right of minorities.

**poll tax** A tax that voters in many states had to pay before they could vote.

**proposition** Potential legislation that voters in some states can place on the ballot. If a proposition passes, it will become a law or constitutional amendment.

**referendum** A measure approved by legislative body that it places on a ballot for approval by voters. Referendums approved by the voters become law.

**republic** A country that has a government in which power is held by the people who elect representatives to manage the government for them.

**suffrage** The right to vote.

**Voting Rights Act** An act passed in 1965 that protected the right to vote for all U.S. citizens. It forced the states to obey the U.S. Constitution. It made it clear that the right to vote could not be denied because of a person’s color or race.