Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 1: Who Can Vote in the United States?

Lesson Overview

This lesson challenges students to speculate about what voting requirements are and then compare their understanding of voting requirements with the actual voting requirements set by selected amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Suggested Grade Level

High School (Grades 9–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

50 minutes

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

- explain general voting requirements,
- understand requirements for voting established by the U.S. Constitution, and
- explain how the suffrage amendments advanced voting rights in the United States.

Vocabulary

- amendment
- citizen
- grandfather clause
- literacy test
- poll tax
- resident
- suffrage
- Voting Rights Act
Materials Needed

Teacher Resources

- Quick Vocabulary (Teacher Resource 1)
- Suffrage Amendments Added to the U.S. Constitution (Teacher Resource 2)

Student Handouts

- What Do You Know about Voting in the United States? (Student Handout 1)

Before the Lesson

- Review and photocopy the lesson’s student handout and teacher resource.
- Inform students that they will be picking up Student Handout 1 as they enter the classroom. Assign a student to monitor this process.

Lesson Procedure

1. Beginning the Lesson: What Do You Know about Voting in the United States?

The lesson begins with a brainstorming activity. Groups of three to five students respond to questions on Student Handout 1. Allow 10–15 minutes for group work and then ask for responses. Set aside enough time to hear all responses. You or a designated student can record responses. Do not correct the responses if they are wrong; include any conflicting or multiple responses.

Review the list of responses and note any discrepancies. This will tell you what the students know and where more information is needed. Tell the class that they will be referring back to their responses later in this and in upcoming lessons.

2. 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 and resulted in widely varying voting qualifications.

3. Compare and Contrast: What Voting Rights Have Been Added to the Constitution?

Students will learn how voting rights have been extended by selected suffrage amendments to the Constitution and should note additions and corrections to the brainstorming responses on Student Handout 1.

Project Teacher Resource 2: Suffrage Amendments Added to the U.S. Constitution, on the screen or board. Tell students they should be able to identify changes or additions to the Constitution pertaining to voting. Call on students to read each amendment aloud to the class. A different
student should read each amendment. Ask the class what additions or changes were made to the Constitution pertaining to voting rights. Ask students to add or correct any changes to the voting information that they recorded on Student Handout 1.

Here are some suggested discussion points:

- **Fourteenth Amendment—Citizenship**
  - Ask students whether this amendment includes voting rights.

- **Fifteenth Amendment—Racial equality in voting**
  - Why was this amendment necessary after the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified?
  - Were there other ways states denied certain people the right to vote?
    - grandfather clause
    - 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 for women to attain the right to vote?

- **Twenty-fourth Amendment—Poll tax abolished**
  - What is a poll tax?
  - Which Americans were most affected by the poll tax?
  - Which Americans benefited the most from this amendment?

- **Twenty-sixth Amendment—The right of eighteen-year-olds to vote**
  - Note the date for this amendment (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 America’s history?

4. **Concluding the Lesson**

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.

- 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 necessary to vote?
• Students may know about residency and other state qualifications.

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

**Critical Thinking Exercise for Lesson 2: Becoming a Voter**

If you choose to teach the optional critical thinking exercise for Lesson 2 (Critical Thinking Exercise: Are Your Registration Forms Valid?), assign the following homework for the next Citizens, Not Spectators class.

- Student Handout 3: National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) with questions
- Student Handout 4: You Be the Judge: *Wesley v. Cox* (2005) with questions