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 in the U.S. Constitution and its suffrage amendments. Students learn that states have the authority over the voter registration process and can add additional requirements.

Suggested Grade Level

High school (grades 10–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

50 minutes

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

• explain general voting requirements,
• understand the voting rights established by the U.S. Constitution,
• explain the suffrage amendments effects on voting rights, and
• understand the voter registration requirements and process in their state.

Vocabulary

• amendment
• citizen
• felony
• poll tax
• resident
• suffrage
Materials Needed

Teacher Resources

- Who Can Vote and What Offices Can They Vote for in the United States? (Teacher Resource 1)
- State Voting Qualifications (Teacher Resource 2)
- Who Can Register to Vote in the United States? (Teacher Resource 3)

Student Handouts

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

Before the Lesson

- Research your state requirements for registering and voting. Visit your secretary of state’s website. See USA.gov or the National Association of Secretaries of State for links to each secretary of state’s website.
- Review and make copies of the lesson’s student handouts and teacher resources.
- Inform students that they will be picking up Student Handout 1 as they enter the classroom. Assign a student to monitor this process.
- Direct students to form groups of two or three and immediately begin their responses to the handout questions.
- Ask one student to act as recorder for the student handout responses.

Lesson Procedure

1. 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 5 minutes for group work and then ask for responses. Set approximately 10 minutes for the responses. You or a designated student can record responses. Do not correct the responses if they are wrong; if there are conflicting or multiple responses, include them.

Review the list of responses and note the 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 Articles I and II of the Constitution

For this part of the lesson, concentrate on who elects the members of Congress and the president.

Begin by using Teacher Resource 1 to project Articles I and II on a screen or the classroom board. Note the ratification date for the Constitution and ask the following questions:
• What branch of government is established by Article I?
• What are the two parts of the federal legislature?
• Who elects members of the House of Representatives?
• Originally, who elected members of the Senate?
• What branch of government is established by Article II?
• Who elects the president and vice president?

Inform students that this is all the Constitution mentioned about voting when it was ratified.

3. Compare and Contrast: Suffrage Amendments

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

Project the amendment excerpts below on a screen or the classroom board. Tell the students that they should look for any changes or additions to the Constitution pertaining to voting. Call on different students to read the amendments; and then, 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 the student handout.

Here are some suggested discussion points:

• Twelfth Amendment—Requires the Electoral College to cast separate ballots for president and vice president (changes Article II, Section 1)

• Fourteenth Amendment—Citizenship
  o Ask students whether this includes voting rights.

• Fifteenth Amendment—Racial equality in voting
  o Why was this amendment needed after the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified?

• Seventeenth Amendment—direct election of Senators (changes Article I)
  o Why do you think voters did not directly elect their Senators for so many years?

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

• Twenty-fourth Amendment—Poll tax abolished
  o What group would most benefit from this amendment?

• Twenty-sixth Amendment—The right of eighteen-year-olds to vote

4. Using Your Knowledge

Ask the students the following questions:
1. 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.

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

3. Numerous guaranteed voting rights extensions have been added to the Constitution. Can you think of any other group that hasn’t been considered?

5. State Voter Registration Requirements

Refer back to Questions 3–5 from Student Handout 1. Provide the correct answers.

Project the top part of Teacher Resource 3 on a screen or the classroom board. Ask students the following questions:

- Can states have additional requirements to register and vote?
  ○ Inform the students of some of the additional state requirements. This information is provided in Teacher Resource 2.

- Does our state have any other registration or voting requirements?
  ○ Project the state information you have researched using the second part of Teacher Resource 3.

5. Concluding the Lesson: What Did You Learn?

Ask students the following questions:

1. What did you learn in this lesson?

2. Where can you find the legal sources for determining voter eligibility?
   • Students should respond with references to the constitutional amendments and the state requirements.

3. Do you think the registration and voting requirements are fair?

6. Preparing for Lesson 2

For the next Citizens, Not Spectators lesson, have students read the following and prepare answers to the questions on each:

- National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) (Student Handout 2)
- United States Code Title 42 (1997) (Student Handout 3)
- You Be the Judge: Wesley v. Cox (2005) (Student Handout 4)
Have students pick up the homework handouts as they leave class. A student monitor can be sure they do so.