Teacher Resource 9: Quick Vocabulary

**absentee ballot** An election ballot, usually returned by mail, for a voter who cannot be present at the polls.

**abstain** To refuse to exercise the right to vote.

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

**citizen** A person who is a legal member of a nation, country, or other organized, self-governing political community, such as any of the fifty U.S. states.

**consensus** A majority agreement or opinion.

**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.
felony A crime, such as murder, considered more serious than a misdemeanor and subject to more stringent punishment.

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.

mentally incompetent Unable to make decisions that ensure one's own welfare. A determination of mental incompetence by a court usually means a person is prohibited from voting.

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

parole Temporary release of a prisoner for a special purpose or a complete release before completing a full prison sentence.

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.
**register** To officially sign up as a qualified voter.

**registrar of voters** An elected official who is responsible for keeping voter registration lists updated. A registrar may also have other duties associated with elections, such as polling place requirements and the hiring of poll workers.

**registration list** Official listing of registered voters entitled to vote at a specific polling place.

**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.