

Expanding Voting Rights

Enduring Understanding

In the early years of the United States, voting rights were commonly extended to white males who owned property. Through constitutional amendments as well as changes in state and federal laws, the right to vote is now guaranteed to most United States citizens, age 18 and older.

Essential Questions

What groups of people have been historically denied the right to vote in the United States?
Which amendments changed voting rights?

Students Shall Be Able To:

C.5.6.13 — Compare United States constitutional Amendments granting citizen's rights.

C.5.6.14 — Examine how citizen's rights are exercised through organizations that influenced societal and governmental change

- *American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)*
- *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)*
- *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*
- *Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)*

Additional Social Studies Connections

H.6.6.2 — Create/construct timelines using the terms:

- *ca (circa)*
- *Before Common Era/Common Era (BCE/CE)*
- *millennia*
- *millenium*
- *decade*
- *century*

Materials Needed/Attachments

Attachment 1 — Voting Rights, 1792 – 1920

Attachment 2 — Barriers to Voting

Attachment 3 — Constitutional Amendment Timeline

Vocabulary

suffrage

grandfather clauses

19th Amendment

disenfranchisement

poll tax

Civil War Amendments

26th Amendment

Voting Rights Act

literacy test

Bill of Rights

24th Amendment

Background Information

Discuss the following information with the class:

The Framers of the Constitution could not agree about who should have the right to vote. They left it up to the state governments to decide who could vote in each state. Several groups of people were excluded from voting including African Americans, women, and Native Americans. Early in our nation's history, white men owning property were the only people allowed to vote by most state governments. The prevailing thought was that a person with property would have more to lose if a bad government came to power. In particular, a person with property would vote for people who would be careful to protect property. The Founders considered the protection of property to be one of the main purposes of government. During the 50 years following the adoption of the Constitution, the vote was given to all white men. However, African Americans, women, and Native Americans still could not vote. It took many years and much hard work before these groups gained the right to vote.

- Using *Attachment 2*, “Barriers to Voting,” remind students that the Civil War Amendments (13th, 14th, 15th) did not stop states from trying to keep blacks from voting
- (See *Attachment 2*, Barriers to Voting.) In many Southern states, laws were passed to make it difficult or impossible for black men to vote.

Teaching Strategies

1. Remind students that the idea of equality was a major item in the Declaration of Independence which states that all people are created equal, they have certain rights, and it is the purpose of government to protect these rights. One of the major rights we have in our democracy is the right to vote.
 - As our nation developed, individuals representing different interests gave good reasons why our laws and documents should allow them equal freedoms with other Americans. **They wanted the right to vote.** Remind students that whether or not a person had the right to vote greatly affected one's life, privileges, and freedoms.
 - Discuss some of the rules by which our early colonists were governed, including the English property requirements for the privilege to vote, and the fact that people were considered citizens of the country in which they were born.
 - Remind students that between 1792 and 1868 each American state determined who could vote and who could not (most denied equal voting rights). (See *Attachment 1*, Voting Rights and Disenfranchised Individuals.)
 - Ask students to name different groups of people who lived in the United States after the Revolution (e.g., men, women, whites, free blacks, slaves, Indians, small farmers, large landowners, merchants, frontiersmen, indentured servants). Discuss which of these groups could vote and which could not vote. Make a list on the board of specific groups who were denied suffrage.
2. Distribute *Attachment 1*, “Voting Rights and Disenfranchised Individuals, 1792-1920”. Divide class into small cooperative learning groups. Each collaborative group will choose one from the disenfranchised group list to research. Each group should prepare a presentation to be given to the rest of the class that may include a role-play, visuals, and/or oral reports.

- Questions students should consider when conducting their research include the following:
 - ♦ *Did these people enjoy equal rights?*
 - ♦ *How were they treated?*
 - ♦ *What were they allowed to do?*
 - ♦ *Were there things they were not allowed to do?*
 - ♦ *What did they do if they did not like the way they were treated?*
- Ask students to express an opinion, possibly brainstorm and explore their ideas in writing, on the following questions:
 - ♦ *“Who should have the right to vote?”*
 - ♦ *Who had the right to vote in early American times?*
 - ♦ *Why was voting limited to just men?*
 - ♦ *What might have been the reasons for excluding women?*
 - ♦ *Why was voting limited to whites?*
 - ♦ *What might have been the reasons for excluding non-white groups -- African Americans or Native Americans?*
 - ♦ *Would property holders be better voters than non-landowners?*
- Have students discuss questions. Also have students list the amendments to the Constitution that protect a citizen’s right to vote.
- Remind students of the need for all three Civil War Amendments:

The 13th Amendment was adopted because the defeat of the South did not free the slaves. Because southern states would not grant citizenship to African Americans, the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted. The 15th Amendment was adopted because southern states said voting was not a right of citizenship in the United States. Discuss with students the distinction between a constitutional amendment that establishes a right or freedom that cannot be taken away and a congressional law that establishes methods of enforcing that right. Review with students the methods states used to attempt to get around the 15th Amendment.

Assessments/Rubrics

Student participation

Teacher-created evaluation

Extension Activity

Small groups of students research **one** of the following topics:

- *African American men gain the right to vote*
- *Women gain the right to vote*
- *Voting rights for Native Americans*
- *Voting rights for 18 year-olds*
- *Student research should include any important events, including constitutional amendments, that helped these groups gain the right to vote. Ask students to make note of the dates of key events to use on a time line. (See [Attachment 3, Constitutional Amendment Timeline.](#))*

Voting Rights and Disenfranchised Individuals, 1792-1920

Barriers that affected voting rights: language, race, sex, land ownership, and local law.

Indians

Although Indians fought with the English against the French and owned land in America, they could not be citizens and could not vote in the United States. An interesting thing to note is that Englishmen who settled in the colonies customarily thought of citizenship as a birthright to anyone born in a country and thought of property ownership as a requirement for the right to vote. Indians were granted voting rights in 1870 (15th Amendment).

Slaves

Slaves were not allowed to vote.

Free Blacks

Free blacks owned property and fought in the Revolutionary and 1812 wars with white colonists, however they were not allowed to vote because they were black. African Americans were granted voting rights in 1870 (15th Amendment).

African Americans

There was a literacy requirement to vote in many states, and there were poll taxes in the other states. In many cases, these barriers prohibited African Americans from voting even after the 15th Amendment was passed.

Small Farmers in North Carolina

Farmers who had 50 acres or more could vote in elections for both the lower and upper house of the state legislature. Farmers with fewer than 50 acres could vote in elections for the lower house.

White Males in Vermont

When Vermont became a state in 1792, all white males continued to share the privilege to vote — as they had when Vermont separated from New Hampshire and New York.

Women

Most local laws did not allow women the right to vote. Women were granted voting rights in 1920 (19th Amendment).

Landowners in Massachusetts

In order to vote in Massachusetts, a man needed to own at least 50 acres of land. If a man owned less than 50 acres, he was considered a citizen but could not vote.

Literacy Tests

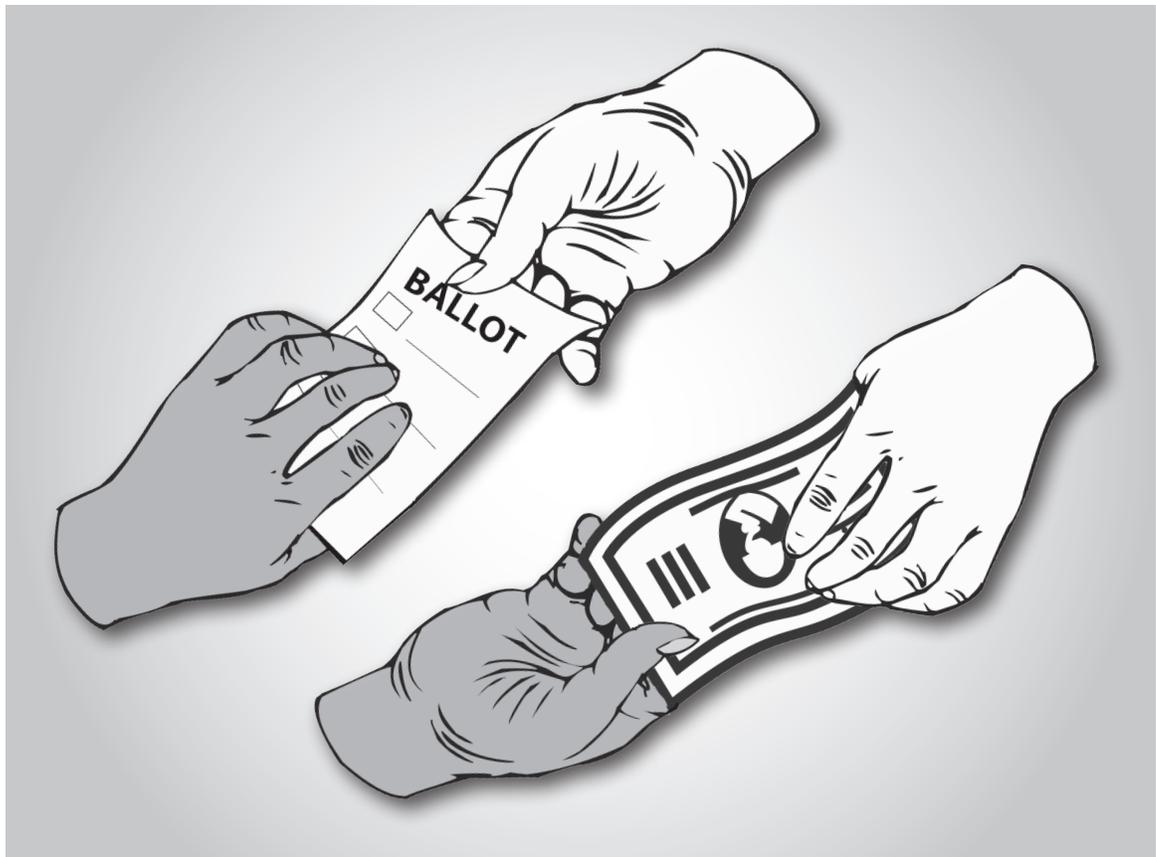
Some states required people to take literacy tests in order to vote. These tests were difficult for most black men because they did not have a chance to get an education. The tests were also given unfairly so that even educated blacks would fail while whites who could not read would pass.

Grandfather Clauses

Some states made laws that allowed people who could not pass a literacy test to vote if their grandfathers had the right to vote. Whites could qualify because their grandfathers had the right to vote. However, no blacks could qualify because none of their grandfathers, who had been slaves, had been allowed to vote.

Poll Taxes

Some states charged a poll tax. Since most former slaves were very poor, they could not pay the tax and therefore could not vote.



Constitutional Amendment Timeline

