

PBS NEWS HOUR CLASSROOM

Lesson plan: The Constitution and voter suppression



Credit: Library of Congress

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Overview

Constitution Day is a great opportunity to discuss the document itself in the context of voting and elections.

Subjects

Civics, social studies, American history

Estimated time

One class period (45 minutes)

Grade level

9 - 12

Objective

Students will:

1. take a 1965 Alabama Literacy Test, and grade it in class.
2. review many parts of the Constitution that are included in the test.
3. read excerpts from President Johnson's speech to Congress and parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
4. research other obstructions which were placed before Black citizens attempting to vote before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (optional extension).

Background

Following the Reconstruction era, southern states and groups like the Ku Klux Klan enforced segregation and intimidated Black citizens, keeping them through various ploys from registering to vote, or if registered, from casting votes that counted in elections.

Registration obstructions were comprised not just of literacy tests, although these were the most common. Registration offices kept odd hours, and they required different documentation for Black registrants than for white ones, who could cite a "grandfather clause" providing for automatic registration if an ancestor had been enrolled. Poll taxes punished poorer citizens who couldn't afford them.

"White primaries" permitted only white citizens to cast ballots, and in states where the Democratic Party was the only one whose nominees ever won, the primary was in fact the election. Precincts were gerrymandered so that white voters would always outnumber African American ones; even if they did get to cast ballots, sometimes African American voters received "tissue paper ballots," made of thinner paper and discarded before the votes were counted.

Procedure

1. Hand out the "[Constitution Test](#)" (answers at end of document) and tell students that they will take it because today is Constitution Day under federal law.
2. When students ask whether the test will count, tell them that you haven't decided yet.
3. After most students have completed the test, ask them to grade their tests.
4. Read the answers aloud. Do not respond if students say, "That's not fair" to an answer like that of #20.
5. After students have marked the number wrong, tell the class: "You just took a 1965 Alabama Literacy Test to determine whether you were qualified to vote. Would you have passed it?"

Discussion questions

1. How might you feel if taking this test robbed you of your right to vote?
2. In 1965, you had to be 21 to vote. How old are Black Alabamans today who were 21 in 1965, and can remember these literacy tests?
3. What are the requirements today for registration and voting in your state in the presidential election?
4. How did the lesson help you to understand the significance of elections?
5. Distribute the handout, "[The End of Literacy Tests: The Voting Rights Act of 1965.](#)" (you can also watch LBJ's speech [here](#)) for reading aloud or reflectively. How would you characterize President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to sign the Voting Right Act into law?

Extension activity

Students may wish to research other voter obstructions: gerrymandering, tissue paper ballots, grandfather clauses, white primaries.

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