

Race and Voting Rights in 2016

Lesson Ideas

The article by Andy Nash about race and voting rights first appeared on pp. 28-29 of the “Talking about Race” issue of *The Change Agent* (March, 2016). (In its original version, it is Level 10. This version is Level 6.) For more on voting rights, see the “Democracy in Action” issue of *The Change Agent* (available as a PDF on our website). Published in March 2008, it is still timely as it covers systems and processes related to the U.S. political system, not issues.

BEFORE YOU READ:

- 1) Do the “History of Voting Rights” activity that starts on p. 2 of this packet and/or watch this “History of Voting” video: <democracyday.com/history-of-voting-video.html>.
- 2) Discuss what stood out to you about the activity and/or the video.
- 3) Describe what happens to voting rights over time. (Hopefully, students will notice that rights are won and lost, that rights are not always guaranteed, that people have to fight for them, etc.)
- 4) Pay special attention to the very end of the voting rights narrative, which covers what is happening currently with voting rights. What are students’ experiences with voter ID laws? Have they read about this in the news? What have they heard from the media or from people they know?
(Note: The “History of Voting” video does not cover voter ID laws. If you just show that video and do not do the “History of Voting Rights” activity, then you will need to introduce the idea of voter IDs.)
- 5) Look for definitions of these vocabulary words: citizens, register/registration, restrict/restrictions, lawmakers, bills, disproportionately, restore, recite. How do you think these words will be used in an article on race and voting?



John Legend is one of the narrators in “History of Voting” video: <democracyday.com/history-of-voting-video.html>.

- 6) What is the Constitution?
(To answer this question, look at <bensguide.gpo.gov>. You can choose between three literacy levels (apprentice, journeyman, or master) to read about how the U.S. government works, including an explanation of the Constitution and federal versus state government.)
- 7) Can everyone vote in your native country? Who can vote? Who can’t?
- 8) Do you think the rules for who can vote are the same or different in every state?
- 9) Skim the article. Look at the title, the subheadings, and the images. What do you think this article will be about?

WHILE YOU READ:

Mark the text. Underline words you don’t know or have a question about. Use a question mark in the margin to indicate something you don’t understand. Put an exclamation mark or a note if you agree or think the point is particularly important.

AFTER YOU READ:

Do the worksheet at the end of this packet.

History of Voting Rights Activity

Updated March 2016

This activity, designed by the Community Leaders Program at The Literacy Project in Greenfield, MA, supplements pages 30-32 of Issue #26.

Purpose

To visually demonstrate when different groups of people had the right to vote in the United States, in law and in fact.

Summary

Each participant assumes an “identity” for the activity. Participants move to different sides of the room as the facilitator reads through a brief timeline of US history.

Before the Activity

1. Create cards labeled:
 - *White male, wealthy property owner*
 - *Wealthy white female*
 - *Poor white male, unable to read or write*
 - *Poor white female*
 - *African American male*
 - *African American female*
 - *Native American female*
 - *Immigrant female, not a citizen, working and paying taxes in the US*
 - *Immigrant male, not a citizen*
 - *Convicted felon, white male, in prison*
 - *18-year-old male*For a larger group, create more copies of the same “identity” cards.
2. Post two signs on different sides of the room: “*Can Vote*” and “*Can’t Vote*”.
3. Ask the group:
Who has the right to vote in the U.S.?
Has it always been this way?

Introduce the Activity

1. Explain that we are going to walk through a timeline of voting rights, to look at when different groups gained or lost the right to vote.
2. Give each person in the group a card with an “identity” written on it.
3. Have the group gather under the “can’t vote” sign.
4. Explain that you will give different dates, and ask the group to decide which groups of people had the right to vote at that point. Anyone with the right to vote should move to the “Can Vote” sign.

Begin the Activity

Using the chart, “The Right to Vote in the United States,” read the date, say what else was happening in the country, and ask: who can vote? Help the group move to the right places at the right times.

Post Activity Discussion Questions

Lead a discussion with questions like:

1. How did it feel to be denied the right to vote?
2. How did it feel to be granted the right to vote?
3. To have the right taken away?
4. What did you learn?
5. Was anyone surprised by what they learned?

Script for History of Voting Rights Activity

Read aloud all text in bold.

We are going to walk through a timeline of voting rights in the United States. We will look at when different groups gained or lost the right to vote. Everyone has a card with an “identity” written on it. You represent that group for this activity.

[Make sure everyone has a card. Ask everyone to read their identity out loud – to make sure everyone has a chance to see the different identities and understand them.]

To start, we need everyone to gather under the “can’t vote” sign.

[wait until the group gathers]

I am going to read different dates, and I’m going to ask the group to decide who had the right to vote at that point. Anyone with the right to vote should move over to the “Can Vote” sign. Does anyone have any questions before we start?

[wait for any questions.]

From 1600-1776, the U.S. was not a country yet. It was a group of colonies that were ruled by Great Britain. Who had the right to vote?

[wait for people to guess. No one really had the right to vote. White male property owners could vote in local elections, but they could not vote on larger issues that affected them.]

Many colonists were angry about this. They said, “We don’t want to pay taxes to Britain because we do not decide how the taxes are spent.” On July 4th, 1776, colonists declared independence from Britain, and the Revolutionary War began.

In 1789, the colonists won the Revolutionary War. Who was the first president? Right, George Washington. At the very beginning of this country, who could vote?

[wait for the group to guess]

Only white men (21 or older) who owned land could vote.

[wait while the white male, wealthy property owner moves to “Can Vote”]

During the 1800s, people moved west and made new states. Some new states wanted to attract immigrants to move there. So they said, “If you move here and stay for 6 months, we will give you the right to vote.”

[wait for immigrant men to move to “Can Vote”]

By 1860, most states allowed white men who didn’t own property to vote.

[wait for Poor White male, cannot read or write and Convicted Felon, white male, in prison to move to “Can Vote”]

Before the Civil War, some eastern states told the western territories, “You can’t let your non-citizen immigrants vote.” These eastern states worried that immigrants would oppose slavery. They didn’t want people who opposed slavery to vote. Non-citizens begin losing their right to vote.

[wait for immigrant men to move back to “Cannot Vote”]

In 1865, the Civil War ended. Slavery was now against the law. In 1870, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution gave men of all races the right to vote.

[wait while African American male moves to “can vote”]

But, in the 1870s and 1880s, some states introduced laws that prevented African Americans from voting. For example, voters had to pass a difficult reading test in order to vote, unless their grandfathers had had the right to vote. So, while the U.S. Constitution gave African American men the right to vote, many states took the right away.

[wait while African American male moves back to “cannot Vote”]

In the 1880s and 1890s, poor people became politically active. Wealthy people worried that poor people were getting too much power. In 1899, many states introduced poll taxes. People now had to pay to vote. Men who could not pay the poll tax could not vote. Convicted felons and ex-felons were also prevented from voting in some states.

[wait while Poor White male, cannot read or write, Convicted Felon, white male, in prison moves back to “Cannot Vote”]

In 1920, women finally won the right to vote. They had fought for many years to win the right to vote. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote.

[wait while wealthy white female, poor white female, Af. Am. female, and Native American female move to “Can Vote” side of the room.]

The Constitution gave all women the right to vote, but some women still couldn’t vote. Why do you think some women still couldn’t vote?

That’s right. Some women could not pay the poll tax or could not pass the literacy test.

[wait while Poor white female and African American female move back to “Cannot Vote.” What about Native American women? They have to move back too because most Native Americans did not have the right to vote.]

In 1924, the U.S. declared that Native Americans were now citizens. (In fact, almost all of them had been killed.) Native Americans could now vote.

(NOTE: Native Americans were given the right to vote in 1887 *only if they renounced their tribal affiliation*. Some Native Americans did not have the right to vote until 1957.)

[wait for Native Americans to go to “Can Vote”]

In the 1950s and 1960s, many people joined the Civil Rights movement. They fought for the rights of African Americans and poor people. They showed how certain laws and practices made it hard for African

Americans to vote. The Civil Rights movement helped pass the 24th Amendment to the Constitution. This Amendment said that states could not charge poll taxes for federal elections. Another law called the Voting Rights Act banned all reading tests.

Men and women (21 or older) of all races and economic levels could vote.

[these people move to “can vote”: Poor white male, unable to read or write; Poor White female; African American male; African American female]

In 1971, young people protesting the Vietnam War argued that if they could fight and die for their country, they should have the right to vote. 18-year-olds are given the right to vote.

[wait while the 18 year old male moves to “Can Vote”]

In 2013, the Supreme Court removed part of the Voting Rights Act. Now, states with a history of discrimination can change voting laws without approval from the federal government. States have already pushed through discriminatory laws that make it more difficult to vote. In addition, more and more states are passing voter identification laws. In 2016, 19 states require voters to have photo identification, while 14 accept other forms of identification. What does this mean for voters? Will some have to move back to the “Can’t Vote” side of the room?

[wait while people decide if anyone has to go back to “Can’t Vote” side of the room.]

Who can vote today? Who can’t vote? Convicted felons and ex-felons cannot vote in some states. Non-citizens — even those who pay taxes — cannot vote. Also, it is more and more common for people without the proper ID to not be able to vote.

Thank you, everyone. You may sit down.

Race and Voting Rights in 2016

Andy Nash

For decades, people have fought to make it easier for citizens to vote. They have passed laws that support people to register more easily, vote at more convenient times, and vote online from home. These efforts make our democracy stronger.

But in 2010, it started getting harder for people to vote. State lawmakers began introducing bills to restrict voting. For the 2016 election, many people will not be allowed to vote unless they have

a photo ID. Many people will not be able to vote early. And there will be limits on same-day registration.

These changes do not affect everyone the same way. They have *more* of an effect on people of color and poor people. Let's look at how voting restrictions *disproportionately affect* people of color and poor people.

Voter ID Laws

Voter identification laws require citizens to present ID in order to vote. In the U.S., 11% of Americans do not have the ID that they need to vote. In the black community, 25% do not have the ID that they need to vote. Also, 20% of young people and 18% of seniors do not have an ID to vote.¹

Some people can't afford to get an ID. Even when the ID is free, the government still requires voters to have a birth certificate. And it can be expensive to get your birth certificate! For example, Sammie Louise Bates, had to choose between paying \$42 for a birth certificate or buying food. She chose food. She said, "We couldn't eat the birth certificate."²

Also, it can be difficult to travel to get the documents you need. This year, Alabama is closing 31 driver's license offices. This is where most people get their IDs. In *every* county where black people

Dumped from the Voting Rolls after 70 Years of Voting



In 1942, Rosanell Eaton was 21 years old. To register to vote, she had to recite part of the Constitution from memory, and she passed a literacy test. She was one of the few blacks to be able to vote in North Carolina. But in 2013, after voting for 70 years, she can no longer vote. The name on her voter-registration card (Rosanell Eaton) does not match the name on her driver's license (Rosa Johnson Eaton). In 2015, Eaton tried to match her documents. She made 11 trips to various agencies — the DMV, two Social Security offices, and several banks. "It was really stressful, difficult, and expensive," she said.

— Excerpted/adapted from <www.thenation.com>.

This is a **Level 6** version of an article that is available at Level 10 in the magazine and online.

make up more than 75% of the registered voters, the driver's license office is closing.

Fewer Opportunities to Vote Early

Early voting is important for people who work a lot or don't have cars. In recent elections, one-third of Americans voted early. Many of them were black.³ The new laws reduce the number of days for early voting. This is bad for black people and working people who depend on being able to vote on the weekend or in the evening.

Voter Registration Restrictions

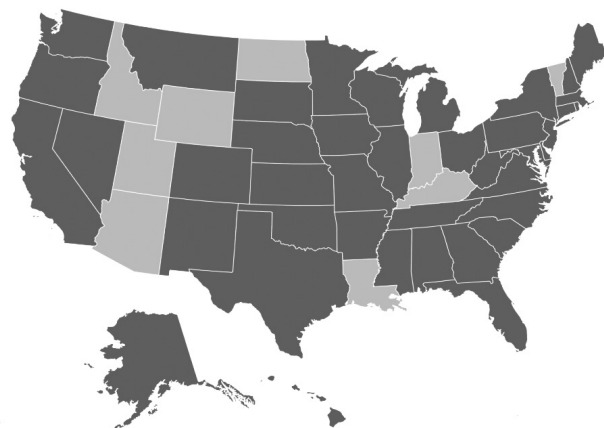
In ten states, it is harder for citizens to register. In North Carolina, for example, voters can no longer register the same day that they vote. Same-day registration made voting easier for everyone by allowing voters to do everything in one trip.

Furthermore, Florida, Iowa, and South Dakota all made it harder for Americans with criminal convictions to vote. Almost 8% of African Americans have lost their right to vote. Compare that to white people. Only 1.8 percent of whites have lost their right to vote.

Fighting Back Against Voter Restrictions

Community groups and black churches are working to restore voting rights. They are having some success. In March, Oregon passed a law that says people will be registered to vote when they renew their driver's license. Also this year,

States with Restrictive Voting Legislation Introduced Since 2011



41 states introduced 180 restrictive laws. 34 introduced photo ID laws. 17 introduced proof of citizenship requirements. 16 introduced bills to limit registration. 9 introduced bills to reduce early voting periods. <www.brennancenter.org>.

the governor of Kentucky gave voting rights to 170,000 people with past convictions.

Despite these efforts, not all Americans have the same opportunity to vote. Some states make it more difficult for poor people and people of color to vote. When this country was new, the the only people who could vote were white men who owned land. We have come a long way since then. But politicians are *still* trying to pick who votes. It is supposed to be the other way around! Voters — *all* voters — should pick the politicians!

Sources: 1. <www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/download_file_39242.pdf>; 2. <www.advancementproject.org>; 3. <prospect.org/article/22-states-wave-new-voting-restrictions-threatens-shift-outcomes-tight-races>.

Andy Nash is director of New England Literacy Resource Center.

More about Race and Voting

Some Examples of How People are Disenfranchised

There are so many ways to be disenfranchised. Below are stories of not being able to vote.

Too Much Bureaucracy

“Lindsay Gonzales moved back to Houston in July. To get a Texas driver’s license or voter ID, she needed to show proof of identity, of residence, and of citizenship. She has been living with her parents, so residency was tough: Her auto registration might work, but the car was in her husband’s name. Officials told her that he had to come with her to the driver’s license office. This would be hard, since he travels a lot for work. She had another problem: her birth certificate shows her maiden name. So she had to get a copy of her marriage certificate, too!”

from: <www.msnbc.com/msnbc/texas-sees-surge-disenfranchised-voters#54860>

No Car, No Vote

“Michael Owens could not reach his polling place on Election Day without a car, but he was able to get to a polling place near work. He was not allowed to vote, however, because North Carolina does not allow people to vote in a different precinct. In NC, people of color have less access to cars and to public transportation.”

from: <www.aclu.org/blog/speak-freely/north-carolinas-step-backward-democracy>



Residents in Winston Salem protested the passage of North Carolina House Bill 589. Photo courtesy of the Advancement Project.

Veteran Turned Away

“Rickey Davis is an Army veteran. When he tried to get a Wisconsin ID, he presented his veterans ID card, military discharge papers, and a Social Security card. Yet Mr. Davis was turned away because he did not have a copy of his birth certificate.”

from: <www.advancementproject.org/pages/whos-really-affected-by-wisconsins-voter-id-law#sthash.9qYpv7Nu.dpuf>

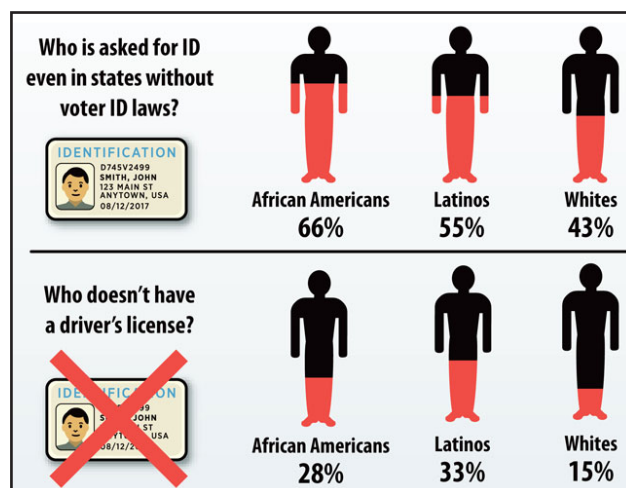
\$2,000 for Birth Certificates



Lorene Hutchins' daughter spent \$2000 trying to find her mother's birth certificate.

"Lorene Hutchins, a 93-year-old African-American woman, was born at home in Mississippi. She never had a birth certificate. Her 70-year old daughter spent several years and more than \$2,000, trying to find her mother's birth certificate so she could vote."

from: <www.advancementproject.org>



What is the main point of this graphic? How does the chart use color to make its point? Write two true statements based on the data you see here. Graphic from: <www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2014-2-march-april/graphic/voter-suppression>

The Voting Rights Act — Then and Now

On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed an important civil rights law – the Voting Rights Act (VRA). The law ended literacy tests, poll taxes, and other forms of discrimination. The law meant that more minorities could from vote. In the 21st century, citizens still use the VRA



to fight modern voting discrimination, including: redistricting plans that favor white people, restrictive voter ID laws, elimination of early voting opportunities, and unfair polling place changes. For an excellent graphic explanation of the Voting Rights Act, as well as 2013 changes to the law: <www2.kqed.org/low-down/2013/11/05/voting-rights>

But the civil rights legacy of the VRA began to unravel on June 25, 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court made the disastrous decision to weaken the VRA in *Shelby County v. Holder*. The decision struck down some of the law's most crucial voter protections. For example, before *Shelby*, states and localities with a history of discrimination had to get clearance from the Department of Justice before enacting any voting law changes. Now free from federal oversight, states have pushed through discriminatory laws that make it more difficult to vote.

As these peaceful protesters marched from Selma to Montgomery, police brutally attacked them, and it was captured on national TV. The resulting outrage helped pressure Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



– excerpted/adapted from <vrafortoday.org/learn>

Read Carefully for Understanding

Worksheet to Accompany “Race and Voting Rights in 2016”

1. According to Nash, what are three ways that voters are being deprived of voting rights?

2. Make a chart from the informaton in the stories. Fill out the columns as modeled below.

Name of person:	Something they need to vote:	Why is it hard to get this thing?
Lindsay Gonzales	needs her husband to go with her to driver's license office	her husband travels for work a lot

3. Do you agree that restrictions on voting rights have disproportionately affected people of color and poor people? Why or why not?

4. Read “More about Race and Voting” and study the chart and box on Voting Rights (pp. 7-8). Look up arguments in favor of voter restrictions, such as: these restrictions will prevent voter fraud. Make your own evaluation of what is happening to voting rights in the U.S. Write an essay using Nash’s article and the additional sources on pp. 7-8 plus your own research.

5. According to Nash, ordinary people are fighting back against voter restrictions. What are they doing?

6. According to the map on p. 6, 41 states have introduced restrictive voting laws. Is your state one of them? If so, what laws have been introduced? Alternatively, are there laws to *relax* voter restrictions? Find out, and then read further about those laws. What do you think of them? Do you agree or disagree with them? Write a letter to your congressperson to express what you think. *[If you cannot find information about the laws in your state, then simply write to your congressperson expressing your opinion in general about voting restrictions.]*