

# THE ROAD TO CITIZENSHIP: A HISTORY OF VOTING RIGHTS

## Introduction:

This lesson involves students in playing the roles of a variety of Americans, who take their places on the “road to citizenship” over a period of almost 200 years. Up to the time of Amendment XIV, the Supreme Court considered the states the source of citizenship, thus allowing them the right to determine voter qualifications. Amendments XV, XIX, XXIII, XXIV, and XXVI were required to secure the right to vote for all persons 18 and older. This “talking timeline” lesson can be used effectively as a culminating activity near the end of a U.S. history course, as a pre-election lesson linking history with current events, or as a civics lesson on the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the evolving Constitution.

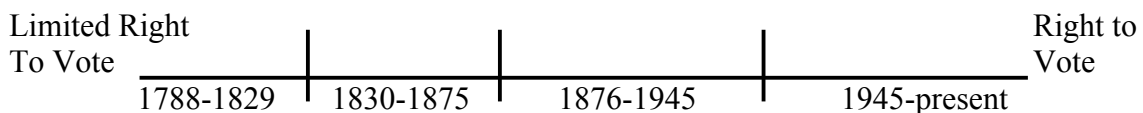
**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

1. Recognize the right to vote as a basic right of citizenship, as well as a responsibility.
2. Understand which segments in society could and could not vote during different periods in history.
3. Reinforce understanding of Amendments XIV, XV, XIX, XXIII, XXIV, and XXVI.
4. Discuss current issues related to voting rights.

**Teaching Time:** 1 or more class periods

**Materials and Preparation:** Make copies of the handout for all students. Also make one set of the role cards and cut them apart. Make a sign for each role or gather materials for students to make their own. The sign can simply be a piece of paper with the title of the role on it, a stick-figure cut-out that can be labeled with the role’s title, or a more creative representation of students’ creation. You may want to give some thought in advance to how you will assign roles, as some assignments may cause inappropriate reactions among students (e.g., giggling when a boy assigned to a woman’s role refers to her husband). On the board (or a piece of butcher paper taped to one wall), draw the “road to citizenship” as shown on the next page:

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Adapted from *Law in U.S. History: A Teacher Resource Manual*, edited by Melinda R. Smith (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1983). Updated 2006 by Laurel Singleton.

You may also want to put the relevant amendments—XIV, XV, XIX, XXIII, XXIV, and XXVI (see handout for text)—on large colored index cards to be added to the timeline.

## Procedure

1. Ask students to jot down on a piece of paper the most important right and the most important responsibility of citizenship. Allow time for a few students to share their ideas. Tell students that some people would say the most important right is the same as the most important responsibility—voting.
2. Distribute the handout and read the background information with students, discussing the questions in the first paragraph, if desired.
3. Explain that students will take the roles of people who could or could not vote during various periods in history. Hand out role cards and the signs or materials for students to make the signs. If students are to make the signs, allow time for them to do so. (If there are more than 22 students, have pairs of students share roles that appear in more than one time period.)
4. Explain that each role represents one or more periods of history and are marked Period 1, 2, 3, and/or 4. When their time period is called, students should stand up along the time line, in numbered sequence, and read their role cards aloud. If they have the right to vote, they should affix their sign on the road to democracy and then take their seat. If they do not have the right to vote, they should sit down without affixing their sign to the timeline. If they had the right to vote and lost it, they should remove their sign and sit down.
5. Read the background for Period 1, 1787-1829, provided on the next page. Then ask, “Who is a citizen? Who has the right to vote?” Ask those persons with roles in that period (Numbers 1-8) to stand and arrange themselves in numerical order. After they read their role card, they will either put their signs on the “road to citizenship” (if they can vote) before returning to their seats or take their signs back to their seats with them (if they cannot vote).
6. Follow the same procedure for Periods 2 (role numbers 9-20), 3 (role numbers 21-30), and 4 (role numbers 31-37). In Period 3, some students will have to remove their signs from the timeline because of disenfranchisement. When the last card has been read, have any students whose cards are off the timeline but who have regained the vote (this should be everyone except the convicted felon) return their cards to the timeline.
7. Pose the following questions for discussion during debriefing:
  - Why did property requirements for voting exist? (You may need to play the devil’s advocate by making the argument that property owners were more likely to be educated and therefore more likely to be informed voters.)

- Why would the frontier regions be the first to drop the property requirement?
  - What influence did changes in some states have on others?
  - Why were the states and not the federal government allowed to set voter qualifications?
  - Why were the five amendments necessary to broaden suffrage?
  - How would you describe the history of the “road to citizenship?”
  - Why are voting rights considered to be the most basic right of citizenship?
  - Do you think voting is also a citizenship responsibility? Why or why not?
8. You may wish to point out that issues related to voting rights remain controversial. Policymakers in various parts of the United States have discussed voting rights for felons and non-citizens who live in the United States. Reauthorization of some provisions of the Voting Rights Act recently stirred up controversy in Congress, where some legislators argued that certain safeguards are no longer necessary; the Act was nonetheless reauthorized in July 2006. With the close presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, many questions about discrimination and unfair practices at the polls arose. Students might research current controversies and speculate on the future of the “road to citizenship” as a means of concluding the lesson.

### **Teacher Background Information (for use in Steps 5 and 6 of Procedure):**

**Period 1—1787-1829:** The nation was just beginning under the Constitution. Many of our colonial experiences would follow us into independence. One was the English property requirement for the privilege to vote. Citizenship was generally thought of as being a result of being born in a country, but it did not carry with it the right to vote.

**Period 2—1830-1875:** With frontier states granting universal suffrage to men, the older states followed suit. Andrew Jackson’s presidency helped to speed the dropping of the property qualification. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, was meant to grant citizenship as well as voting rights to African Americans. Many African Americans voted during this early Reconstruction period.

**Period 3—1876-1945:** Despite the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, African Americans were denied their voting rights. After Reconstruction, the Supreme Court allowed the states to continue to set voter qualifications. States were creative in designing ways to keep African Americans from the polls. Women could vote in some western states prior to the Nineteenth Amendment, but that amendment granted suffrage to all women. An act of Congress gave Native Americans the right to vote.

**Period 4—1945-present:** This period is sometimes known as the Second Reconstruction period. Harry Truman set the federal tone by desegregating the armed forces. A series of laws began to lay the groundwork for the 1965 Voting Rights Act and other civil rights acts.

## Related Children's Literature:

The battle for women's suffrage is a voting-related topic that is especially well covered in children's literature. Among the books on this topic are:

- *I Could Do That! Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote*, by Linda Arms White (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), nonfiction picture book.
- *When Esther Morris Headed West: Women, Wyoming, and the Right to Vote*, by Connie Nordhielm Wooldridge (New York: Holiday House, 2002), nonfiction picture book.
- *The Ballot Box Battle*, by Emily Arnold McCully (New York: Knopf, 1996), picture book.
- *A Long Way to Go*, by Zibby O'Neal (New York: Puffin Books, 1990), easy chapter book.
- *You Want Women to Vote, Lizzie Stanton?* by Jean Fritz (New York: Putnam, 1995), biography for upper elementary and middle school students.
- *Radical Red*, by James Duffy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), more difficult chapter book.
- *With Courage and Cloth: Winning the Fight for a Woman's Right to Vote*, by Ann Bausum (Washington, DC: National Geographic Children's Books, 2004), advanced nonfiction.

Other books that deal with voting are:

- *Granddaddy's Gift*, by Margaree King Mitchell (New York: BridgeWater Books, 1997), picture book.
- *The Day Gogo Went to Vote*, by Elinor Batezat Sisulu (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), picture book with considerable text.
- *Vote!* by Eileen Chistelow (New York: Clarion Books), nonfiction book for intermediate-level students.

## Handout

# The Road to Citizenship: A History of Voting Rights

## Background

What does citizenship mean? What, if any, are the basic rights of a U.S. citizen? What, if any, are his or her duties?

The right to vote is basic to the meaning of citizenship. It opens the door to other rights through participation in the political process.

From 1792 to 1868, the Supreme Court instituted that the states should determine who could vote. It based this view on Article 1, Section 2, of the Constitution, which implied that a person eligible to vote in a state was also eligible to vote on the national level.

The states have used this power not only to determine who shall vote but also who shall **not** vote. States have historically denied suffrage, and thus participation in the political process, to certain groups. In the earliest years, suffrage was the exclusive right of free, white, adult males owning property. Property qualifications were the first limitations on voting rights to be dropped.

The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, states that any person born or naturalized in the United States is a ***citizen of the nation***, as well as the state in which he lives. The federal government, as well as the states, thus became the source of citizenship. States could no longer limit or deny the rights and privileges of national citizenship.

The Supreme Court chose, however, to leave voter qualifications in the hands of the states, unless there was a clear violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-third, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth Amendments were therefore needed to secure that right for all persons 18 years of age and older. By 1972, all American citizens 18 years of age and older legally had the right to vote.

## Amendments Extending Citizenship and the Right to Vote

Fourteenth Amendment (1868) – All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (Section 1)

Fifteenth Amendment (1870) – The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. (Section 1)

Nineteenth Amendment (1920) – The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Twenty-third Amendment (1961) – The District constituting the seat of Government of the United States shall appoint in such manner as the Congress may direct:

A number of electors of President and Vice-President equal to the whole number of Senators and Representatives in Congress to which the District would be entitled if it were a state...for the purposes of the election of President and Vice-President.  
(Section 1)

Twenty-fourth Amendment (1964) – The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice-President, for electors for President or Vice-President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax. (Section 1)

Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971) – The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age. (Section 1)

## Role Cards

### **Indian**

1. (Period 1) I am a native of this land, but I cannot be a citizen according to the white man's law. I cannot vote.
27. (Period 3) According to a 1924 law passed by Congress, I am now a citizen of the United States. I can vote in many state and national elections. However, some Western states still do not allow me to vote.
31. (Period 4) In 1956, Utah becomes the last state to give Native Americans voting rights. I can finally vote everywhere in the United States.

### **Free African American**

2. (Period 1) I have served in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. I own property, but because I am black, I cannot vote in most states.
11. (Period 2) According to the Supreme Court decision handed down in the Dred Scott case in 1857, African Americans are not citizens at all. We have no protection under the law, no rights, even though we are not slaves.

### **Laborer in Massachusetts**

3. (Period 1) The law in this state says that in order to vote, a man must own at least 50 acres of land. I own nothing. I am still considered a citizen, but what good does that do if I can't vote?
10. (Period 2) Property rights for voting have been dropped throughout the nation. Now I can vote.

### **Woman**

4. (Period 1) I have pioneered side by side with my husband, but I cannot vote.

20. (Period 2) Women still don't have the right to vote. In 1872, Mrs. Virginia Minor tried to register to vote in Missouri. When she was turned away, she filed a lawsuit. She said that the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed her citizenship and the right to vote. The Supreme Court did not agree. In 1875 the court decided that it was up to the states to grant or restrict the right to vote.

26. (Period 3) After years of struggle, women have at last won the right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920. It says, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

### **Planter from Virginia**

5. (Period 1) I own 1,000 acres. I am one of the richest people in my state. I, of course, have the right to vote.

### **North Carolina Farmer**

6. (Period 1) I can vote in elections for the lower house of the state legislature. To vote for representatives in the upper house, you must have 50 acres. I don't own that much, so I can't vote.

9. (Period 2) I can vote now because all states dropped property requirements after Andrew Jackson became President.



### **Vermont Logger**

7. (Period 1) Ever since Vermont broke from New Hampshire and New York, all white men have been granted the right to vote. When we became a state in 1792, this practice was continued.

### **Kentucky Frontiersman**

8. (Period 1) In Virginia, where I came from, the voters always had to be free while males and to own some land. Owning land helped make for responsible voting. But, in Kentucky, many of us did not have title to our land because we had arrived so recently. If the new state of Kentucky adopted Virginia's voting law, few of us would be allowed to vote. Furthermore, we helped defend the settlements from attacking Indians. Our argument was that we were allowed to fight for this government shouldn't we be able to also vote? When Kentucky became a state in 1792, the constitution here did not include the requirement that voters must own land. By 1800, the state's leaders had decided all white males should be able to vote. Other new states did the same. I have the right to vote.

### **African American Man from Southern State**

12. (Period 2) I now have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. (Read the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the class.)

21. (Period 3) I tried to vote in 1876 as usual, but an election official refused my vote. A lawsuit followed. It went to the Supreme Court. I claimed that the Fifteenth Amendment had been violated. The Supreme Court ruled that the Fifteenth does not give the right to vote to anyone; it only protects me from discrimination when I try to vote. The court said that there was no evidence that my vote was not counted because I am black. If that wasn't evidence, I don't know what is! I have lost the vote.

### **African American Man from Louisiana**

13. (Period 2) I have the right to vote now because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

22. (Period 3) I was with a group of African American men who tried to vote, but the whites wouldn't let us. We took over the courthouse, and there was a shoot-out in which 60 black men were killed. We filed suit on the basis that our Fifteenth Amendment rights had been violated. Our case went to the Supreme Court in 1876. The court ruled against us. It said that the incident was not a clear case of discrimination. It said that it was not clear the people were killed to keep them from voting because they were black. I don't think the court's reasoning makes sense, but we have lost the right to vote in Louisiana.

### **African American Man from Oklahoma**

14. (Period 2) I have the right to vote now because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

25. (Period 3) Oklahoma passed a law saying we had to either (1) pass a literacy test to vote or (2) have proof that our grandfathers voted in 1886. The whites could prove the second part, so they were exempt from the literacy test. Of course we blacks couldn't prove the second part, so we have to read some hard material from the Constitution to be able to vote. We all failed it. We filed suit. Eventually the Supreme Court struck down the second part of the law, the "grandfather clause," but upheld the literacy test. We lost the right to vote.

### **African American Man from North Carolina**

15. (Period 2) I have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

32. (Period 4) A North Carolina law required that all voters be able to read and write a section of the state constitution in English. I couldn't do it because they chose the hardest section. A suit was filed. The Supreme Court ruled in 1959 that they thought a literacy test was a good idea and that it didn't violate the Fifteenth Amendment. We lost the right to vote in North Carolina because our schools are poor; we don't learn to read very well.

### **African American Man from Texas**

16. (Period 2) I have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

28. (Period 3) Voting in a Democratic primary in Texas means voting in the real election. No other party has a chance to win in the general election. Texas passed a law in 1927 forbidding blacks the right to vote in the Democratic primary. The Supreme Court struck it down. In 1935 the legislature passed another law limiting Democratic party membership to whites. The Supreme Court upheld it as constitutional, so we African Americans lost the right to vote.

### **African American Man from Georgia**

17. (Period 2) I have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

30. (Period 3) The state began charging a tax to vote. It is called a poll tax. Money is scarce for blacks, so it has kept us from voting. The poll tax was challenged in the Supreme Court in 1937; it was upheld as constitutional. We have lost our right to vote.

### **African American Man from Virginia**

18. (Period 2) I have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

34. (Period 4) As of 1964, the poll tax has been abolished by the Twenty-fourth Amendment (read amendment). In a test case in Virginia, it was held that poll taxes were illegal not only in national elections but in state and local elections as well. I didn't lose the vote.

### **African American Man from South Carolina**

19. (Period 2) I have the right to vote because of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

35. (Period 4) In 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed. It suspended all literacy tests. It provided for federal supervision of voter registration in six states to make sure that no racial discrimination in voter registration was allowed. It is the most effective civil rights legislation ever enacted. Within four years, 1 millions African Americans had registered to vote. This act was upheld as constitutional by the Supreme Court in the 1966 case South Carolina v. *Katzenbach*. The Voting Rights Act was reauthorized in July 2006.

### **Chinese Alien Living in United States**

23. (Period 3) I am Chinese and have been living here since 1876. My children were born here, but I cannot be a citizen because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which denies me the right to ever become a U.S. citizen. I pay taxes, but I cannot vote.

### **Chinese Male Born of Alien Parents**

24. (Period 3) My parents are aliens and cannot become citizens because they are Chinese. I was born here. I am, therefore, a native-born citizen. We have been declared citizens by a Supreme Court decision in 1898. I have the right to vote.

### **Puerto Ricans and Virgin Islanders**

29. (Period 3) Puerto Rico was annexed by the United States after the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship in 1917. The Virgin Islands were purchased from Denmark in 1917. The natives were made citizens in 1927. We can vote in national primaries for President, but we cannot vote in the general election.

### **Resident of Washington, D.C**

33. (Period 4) I have never been able to vote in national elections. As of 1961, the Twenty-third Amendment gives residents of the nation's capitol the right to vote in national elections for president and vice-president (read the Twenty-third Amendment).

### **18-Year-Old**

36. (Period 4) Because of the Twenty-sixth Amendment ratified in 1971, I now have the right to vote. Before this, 18-year-olds were not allowed to vote.

### **Convicted Felon**

37. (Period 4) I have lost my right to vote. Depending on what state I live in, I may be able to vote when I get out of prison. But the state makes it hard for me to find out my rights. I will have to pay taxes and social security, but I will not be able to vote.