

DataHaven

Classroom Materials

Title of Material: Voting in America Document Analysis

Topics Discussed: Voting rights, suffrage history, civil rights, Election Day

Skills Utilized: Reading skills, annotations, historical document reading, document based questions

Format: Individual or in small groups, discuss as a class

In Person or Online: Either

Procedure/Instruction Suggestions:

This can be used for an essay, where students are required to use and cite the documents within their writing; a stations activity; a “think pair share”; group work etc

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Voting in America

Directions: Read and annotate the excerpts below and analyze how voting rights in America have evolved. Make sure you pay attention to the italicized background information and the dates. Then, answer the thought questions.

Excerpt I: 15th Amendment

Passed on February 26, 1869, and ratified February 3, 1870, the 15th Amendment granted African American men the right to vote. Prior, they were denied this right on the basis of their race.

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. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Excerpt II: 19th Amendment

Passed on June 4, 1919, and ratified August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote. Prior, they were denied this right on the basis of their sex.

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. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Excerpt III: The Voting Rights Act

The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965, by President Lyndon Johnson. It outlawed the discriminatory and violent practices in many southern states during the Jim Crow era, including literacy tests, poll taxes and lynchings, to intimidate or deny predominantly Black individuals their right to vote.

An act to enforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and for other purposes. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That this Act shall be known as the "Voting Rights Act of 1965." No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.

Excerpt IV: Fannie Lou Hamer Interview

Fannie Lou Hamer, interviewed here by Neil McMillen on April 14, 1972, was a civil rights activist that spoke out against the voter suppression that was rampant in the United States during the Jim Crow Era. She was also a vocal women's rights activist. She was the co-founder and vice-chair of the Freedom Democratic Party, led voter drives, and spoke out against the abuse women like herself were subjected to.

Interview text courtesy of Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive McCain Library and Archive, University of Southern Mississippi.

HAMER: Well, I didn't know anything about voting; I didn't know anything about registering to vote. One night I went to the church. They had a mass meeting. And I went to the church, and they talked about how it was our right, that we could register and vote. They were talking about we could vote out people that we didn't want in office, we thought that wasn't right, that we could vote them out. That sounded interesting enough to me that I wanted to try it. I had never heard, until 1962, that black people could register and vote...

Well, when I first tried to register it was in Indianola. I went to Indianola on the thirty-first of August in 1962; that was to try to register. When we got there—there was eighteen of us went that day—so when we got there, there were people there with guns and just a lot of strange-looking people to us. We went on in the circuit clerk's office, and he asked us what did we want; and we told him what we wanted. We wanted to try to register. He told us that all of us would have to get out of there except two. So I was one of the two persons that remained inside, to try to register, [with] another young man named Mr. Ernest Davis. We stayed in to take the literacy test. So the registrar gave me the sixteenth section of the Constitution of Mississippi. He pointed it out in the book and told me to look at it and then copy it down just like I saw it in the book: Put a period where a period was supposed to be, a comma and all of that. After I copied it down he told me right below that to give a real reasonable interpretation then, interpret what I had read. That was impossible. I had tried to give it, but I didn't even know what it meant, much less to interpret it. . . .

Well, when we got back I went on out to where I had been staying for eighteen years, and the landowner had talked to my husband and told him I had to leave the place. My little girl, the child that I raised, met me and told me that the landowner was mad and I might have to leave. So during the time that my husband was talking about it, I was back in the house. The landowner drove up and asked him had I made it back. He [my husband] told him I had. I got up and walked out on the porch, and he [told] me did Pap tell me what he said. I told him, "He did." He said, "Well, I mean that, you'll have to go down and withdraw your registration, or you'll have to leave this place." I didn't call myself saying nothing smart, but I couldn't understand it. I answered the only way I could and told him that I didn't go down there to register for him; I went down there to register for myself. This seemed like it made him madder when I told him that.

Excerpt V: Election Day

One way that individuals are denied their right to vote is because they have to work on election day. There is debate over how to confront this particular voting rights issue. The following is from a 2018 Pew Research article titled, “Weekday elections set the U.S. apart from many other advanced democracies,” by Drew Desilver.

Many of the millions of Americans voting in Tuesday’s midterm elections will have to do so while working around the demands of their jobs – hitting their polling places before work, taking an extra-long lunch break or going afterward and hoping to make it before the polls close. As they stand in line, many of them may wonder why it is that the United States votes on a Tuesday, of all days. (To be fair, more than 38 million Americans already have voted early in person, by mail or by absentee ballot, according to a tally maintained by University of Florida political scientist Michael McDonald.)

The first law designating Election Day as the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November was passed back in 1845. At the time, every state except South Carolina was choosing its presidential electors by popular vote, and had considerable flexibility in deciding when to hold its elections. But as transportation and communications links between the states improved, concern grew that later-voting states could be influenced by the results in earlier-voting ones...

But why November, and why on a Tuesday? As a State Department explainer from 2008 put it, back then the U.S. was a predominantly agrarian society. November made sense because it was after farmers were done with their harvest, but before hard winter weather that could make it difficult for them to get to town to vote. And since traveling by horse over unimproved roads could take a while, lawmakers wanted to avoid making their constituents travel to or from the polls on a Sunday (widely considered a day of rest and worship, not politicking).

The U.S. is one of only nine OECD nations that have weekday voting. In the 21st century, however, America’s election schedule makes it an outlier among advanced industrial democracies. A Pew Research Center analysis finds that 27 of the 36 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development hold their

national elections on the weekend, while two others (Israel and South Korea) hold elections on weekdays but make those days national holidays so economic hardship won’t be a barrier to electoral participation. There have been repeated proposals in the U.S. over the years to either move Election Day to the weekend or make it a federal holiday, on the grounds that doing so would boost turnout. A recent Pew Research Center poll found bipartisan majority support for the idea: 71% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents and 59% of Republicans and GOP leaners said they would support making Election Day a national holiday. But while proposals to do that have periodically been introduced in Congress, none have gotten very far.

A handful of states give employees Election Day off

■ Election Day is a holiday for state workers



Note: Election Day is holiday in Kentucky only in presidential election years. As of Nov. 6, 2018.

Source: Council of State Governments, “Book of the States 2018.”

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Thought Questions

1. What is the right to vote and why is it fundamental?
2. Create a timeline for voting in America, including the 15th Amendment, the 19th Amendment, the Voting Rights Act, and how voting stands today. Make sure you cite both how voting became more accessible and how it has been suppressed.
3. Why is the work of activists and politicians who expanded the right to vote so important?
4. Research how voting rights are currently being impacted by events like COVID-19 and the rallying against mail-in voting. Reflect on how this is a part of our voting history.
5. How can *you* use this information to help support voting rights? What kind of actions can you take?