

# Voting Rights and Equality in the United States of America

## Overview

In this two-part lesson students will use primary sources to explore voting rights in the United States. In Part I, students will analyze two sets of documents to gain a deeper understanding of how suffrage has been both expanded and suppressed, developing claims about how voting rights impact equality.

In Part II, students will further analyze one of the documents from Day One before taking on the role of a congressional committee charged with amending (or not) the Voting Rights Act to increase equality in the United States.

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Use analysis skills to make inferences about the content, context, and relevance of primary source documents.
- Develop evidence-based claims and arguments about the connection between voting rights and equality.
- Make evidence-based arguments and reach a conclusion through participation in a discussion.

## Materials

**Part I:** Sources Pack 1: Sources A, B, and C. (1 per pair of students)  
Sources Pack 2: Sources D, E, and F (1 per pair of students)  
Handout A (1 per student)

**Part II:** Handout B (1 per student)  
Optional: Handout C (1 per student)

## Sources:

- A. "The first vote" / AW; drawn by A.R. Waud, 1867:  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2011648984/>
- B. "Ready to vote" 1918: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ggb2006002004/>
- C. Demonstration for reduction in voting age, Seattle, 1969  
<http://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/imlsmohai/id/1715/rec/6>
- D. "Sign, Mineola, Texas" 1939: <https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa1997025030/PP/>

E. Rosa Parks Papers: Miscellany, 1934-2005; Receipts; Poll tax, 1957:  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss85943.002605/?sp=2>

F. The color line still exists (literacy test)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002710390/>

G. S. Rept. 109-295 - FANNIE LOU HAMER, ROSA PARKS, CORETTA SCOTT KING, AND CESAR E. CHAVEZ VOTING RIGHTS ACT REAUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006 109th Congress (2005-2006): <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/109th-congress/senate-report/295>

Note: The students will use two sections of this source. Section 1: Page 1 of PDF; Section 2: Pages 7-8 (Part VI).

## Preparation

**Part I:** Assemble Source Packs for each pair of students.  
Copy Handout A – 1 per student

**Part II:** Copy Handout B – 1 per student  
Optional: Copy Handout C - 1 per student

## Lesson Implementation

### Part I

#### 1. Introduction

Explain to students that they are going to explore and answer the following question:

*How could equality in the United States be improved through voting rights?*

Tell students that they are going to work with a partner to explore this question by examining primary sources.

#### 2. Pairs Analyze Source Pack 1

Divide the class into pairs of students and distribute Source Pack 1. Students should spend a few minutes on each document, answering the questions posed about the sources.

Source Pack 1:

- A. "The First Vote"
- B. "Ready to Vote"
- C. "Demonstration for reduction in voting age, Seattle, 1969"

### 3. Brief Discussion

After students have completed Source Pack 1, ask:

- What was the most interesting document? Why?
- What story do the documents tell about equality?
- Why is voting an important issue of equality in America?

### 4. Pairs Analyze Source Pack 2

Distribute Source Pack 2 to each pair of students and ask them again to examine each source and answer the questions posed.

Source Pack 2:

- D. “Pay your poll tax now”
- E. “Rosa Parks’ poll tax receipt”
- F. “The color line still exists”
- G. S. Rept. 109-295 - FANNIE LOU HAMER, ROSA PARKS, CORETTA SCOTT KING, AND CESAR E. CHAVEZ VOTING RIGHTS ACT REAUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006 109th Congress (2005-2006)

### 5. Part I Closure & Assessment

Facilitate a class discussion:

- What was the most interesting source? Why?
- What did someone else notice about a source that you might have missed?
- What is your best advice for examining sources?
- What did the sources reveal about voting rights and equality?

Assessment

Distribute links to (or hard copies of) the bibliographic information for each of the sources.

Assign the students to:

1. Read the bibliographic information.
2. Answer the following questions:
  - A. Was your interpretation of the source accurate? What important information did you learn about the source?
  - B. What did you learn from the sources and bibliographic information about voting rights and equality?

## Part II

Enduring Understanding: Equality is a balancing act that requires continual review and revision.

Essential Question: How could equality in the United States be improved through voting rights?

### 1. Introduction

Remind the students that in Part I of this lesson they examined several sources that reflected the expansion and the suppression of voting rights. Distribute Handout B to each student and read and discuss section A of the handout with the class.

Explain to the class that now they are going to become members of Congress who have been appointed to a special committee to determine if the Voting Rights Act should be further amended to increase equality in the U.S.

### 2. Small Groups

Divide the class into groups of 4 and explain that each group is a congressional committee.

**Optional:** Ask students to count off in their groups, 1-4 (or 1-3 if three in a group). Distribute **Handout C: Representatives** and explain that each student should find his/her role on the handout and stay in that role for the upcoming committee meeting. In addition, everyone should read about the other members in the committee to gain understanding about how they might think.

Ask students to follow the instructions on the handout to conduct their committee meetings.

### 3. Committee Reports

Ask a member of each committee to share the decision his or her group made about compulsory voting.

### 4. Conclusion & Assessment

Facilitate a class discussion:

- Did all of the committees agree?
- What were some of the strongest arguments made in your committee?
- What did you learn about voting and equality?
- Do you think equality in the U.S. is a “done deal” or do you think there is more to do to improve equality?

If you used Handout C to put students into specific roles, ask students to what degree their decisions were influenced by the roles they had to take and if their individual opinions differed from the views they took according to their assigned roles.

Assessment:

Assign students to state and support their opinions on the following:

Do you think equality is a balancing act that requires continual review

## Handout A – Page 1

### Source A

1. What is this source?
2. Describe what you see. What is happening in the image?
3. What do you think this image has to do with American history? What are two clues that tell you when this was made?
4. What do you think this image has to do with equality in America?
5. What do you wonder about? Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?



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### Source B

1. What is this source?
2. Describe what you see. What is happening in the image?
3. When do you think this image was made? What do you think this image has to do with American history?
4. What do you think this image has to do with equality in America?
5. What do you wonder about? Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?



## Handout A – Page 2

### Source C



1. What is this source?
2. Describe what you see. What is happening in the image?
3. When do you think this image was made? What do you think this image has to do with American history?
4. What do you think this image has to do with equality in America?
5. What do you wonder about? Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

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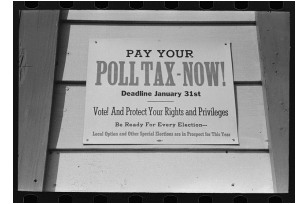
Now think about all three of the sources you examined.

- What was the most interesting document? Why?
- What story do the documents tell about equality?
- Why is voting an important issue of equality in America?

## Handout A – Page 3

### Source D

1. What do you see in this image?

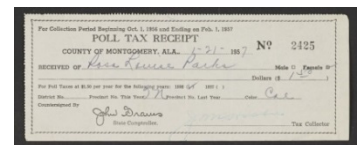


2. What is this sign announcing? What do you think a “poll tax” is?

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### Source E

1. What is this document? When was it made?



2. What is interesting about this document?

3. What do you notice that you didn't expect?

4. What do you think Image D and E have to do with American history?

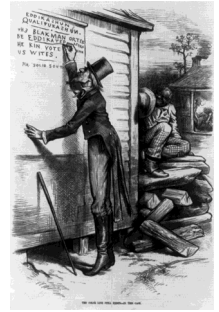
5. What do you think these images have to do with equality in America?

6. What do you wonder about? Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

# Handout A – Page 4

## Source F

1. What is this document?
2. Describe what you see. What is happening in the cartoon?
3. When do you think this cartoon was made? What issue is this cartoon about?
4. What do you think the cartoonist’s opinion on this issue is?
5. What do you think this image has to do with American history?
6. What do you think this cartoon has to do with equality in America?
7. What do you wonder about? Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?



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## Source G (First Section: Page 1 Second Section: Part VI)

1. What is the first section of this document? What is the second section? As a whole, what is this document?
2. What do you notice that you didn’t expect?
3. What did you learn from this document about voting?
4. Thinking about Documents D – G, what story are these documents telling about voting in America?
5. Why is voting important to equality in America?

Calendar No. 523	
House	Senate
100th Congress	100th Congress
1st Session	2nd Session

FRANCIS LEO BAKER, ROMA PARK, COURETS, ROYCE KING, AND CHARLES CLAYTON VOTING RIGHTS ACT RE AUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006

July 19, 2006—Ordered to be printed

Mr. BENTLEY, from the Committee on the Judiciary, submitted the following

REPORT  
together with  
ADDITIONAL VIEWS

To accompany H. R. 2700

(Including cost estimates of the Congressional Budget Office)

The Committee on the Judiciary, to which was referred the bill (H. R. 2700) to amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965 having considered the same, reports favorably thereon, with amendments and recommends that the bill (as amended) do pass.

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1	Report of the Voting Rights Act
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4	Statement of the Honorable Committee on the Judiciary
5	Statement of the Honorable Committee on the Judiciary
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50	Statement of the Honorable Committee on the Judiciary



## A. Amending Voting Laws

You have examined several primary source documents related to voting rights in America. The first set illustrated how voting rights have expanded to include people of different races and ethnic groups, women, and 18 year-olds. The second set of documents focused on ways that voting rights have been restricted, including poll taxes and voter literacy tests.

Take another look at the title page of the congressional report. When did this report take place? What was the purpose of the report? What names do you recognize on the cover sheet? What do these names tell you about the content of the report?

As you have figured out by now, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it illegal for any state to have laws that restricted voting rights.

*Section 2 explains that the “purpose of this Act is to ensure that the right of all citizens to vote, including the right to register to vote and cast meaningful votes, is preserved and protected as guaranteed by the Constitution.”*

You should have also figured out that the purpose of the report is to persuade Congress to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act of 1965 with at least one *amendment* (change). The amendments presented in this report added further protections of voting rights, including the rights of Spanish-speaking citizens.

**Calendar No. 523**

109TH CONGRESS } 2d Session	SENATE	{ REPORT 109-295
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FANNIE LOU HAMER, ROSA PARKS, CORETTA SCOTT KING, AND CÉSAR E. CHÁVEZ VOTING RIGHTS ACT RE-AUTHORIZATION AND AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2006

JULY 26, 2006.—Ordered to be printed

Mr. SPECTER, from the Committee on the Judiciary,  
submitted the following

**R E P O R T**

together with

**ADDITIONAL VIEWS**

[To accompany S. 2703]

[Including cost estimate of the Congressional Budget Office]

The Committee on the Judiciary, to which was referred the bill (S. 2703) to amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965 having considered the same, reports favorably thereon with an amendment and recommends that the bill (as amended) do pass.

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## Handout B - Page 2

### B. Congressional Committee

Imagine that your group is a special congressional committee that has been appointed to determine if the Voting Rights Act should be further amended to increase equality. Your committee will consider several options.

#### Step 1: Background

Your staff has prepared background on this matter. Each committee member should read the background information in the box below.

##### Option to Improve Equality 1: Compulsory Voting

Many people who have chosen to exercise their right to vote have been stopped from doing so, whether by literacy tests, poll taxes, or other means. But what if the opposite was true? What if people who might otherwise choose *not* to vote had to vote, anyway? What if voting was not just a *right* but also a required *duty*?

Some people believe that citizens in the United States should be required to vote. This is called **compulsory voting**. Today, as many as 22 countries have compulsory voting laws, but it has not been the law in the United States.

Without a valid excuse, people in countries with compulsory voting laws may face **sanctions**, or administrative punishments, if they do not vote. Several of these countries enforce the laws with sanctions such as fines, requiring explanations from non-voters, and even possible imprisonment (for not paying fines). The sanctions apply to all non-voters equally.

#### Step 2: Examine Arguments in Favor and Arguments Opposed

Consider this question: *Would compulsory voting in the United States improve equality?*

Half of your committee should read the *arguments in favor* and the other half read the *arguments opposed*. As you read, make notes about the arguments:

- Is the argument strong?
- Why or why not?

Arguments **in favor** of compulsory voting:

- Compulsory voting laws do increase voter turnout. Studies show that compulsory voting increases turnout by 7 to 16 percent. In Australia voter turnout is about 95 percent.

## Handout B – Page 3

- Compulsory voting increases voting among people who are poor, less educated, and were previously disenfranchised, or denied the right to vote. Recall that several U.S. states required voters to pass literacy tests. This practice discriminated against people who could not read. Today, indigenous people in most countries are still less likely to vote. This is true of Latinos, young voters, and African Americans living in the United States. Compulsory voting gives an equal voice between the majority of people and those whose ancestors were disenfranchised.

- Elections with high rates of voter participation are more legitimate because they better represent the will of the people.

- Citizens are required to pay taxes, register for the military, and other responsibilities for the common good. It is reasonable to require voting, which is, after all, a defining feature of democratic governance.

- Compulsory voting educates voters. If people know they must vote, they will pay closer attention to the issues. All voters will go to the polls with information at hand.

- Compulsory voting laws build positive civic attitudes by reinforcing that voting is a vital part of democratic citizenship.

- Many candidates and political parties use negative campaigns to “scare” people to go to the polls. Mandatory voting would reduce the incentive to air negative advertisements.

### Arguments **opposed** to compulsory voting:

- Democracy is about freedom, including the freedom to choose to participate. Authoritarian governments often coerce people to vote and to attend political rallies to give the appearance that their leaders are popular. Voluntary voting makes democracy more reflective of the people’s actual choices.

- People who are happy with the way things are may feel no need to vote. Low voter turnout may be a sign of overall voter satisfaction with the current system. Similarly, people will vote if they really care about the election results.

- People who do not know or care about the candidates or the issues will not make wise or informed decisions. They may simply vote for someone at random and cancel the votes of people who do care. Forcing uninterested people to vote turns the idea of choice into a farce.

- Citizens can challenge corruption or fraud by not voting. People should not have to vote for politicians they do not trust. Some voters deliberately spoil their ballots in protest. They will do this to show their disapproval of the candidates. Compulsory voting does not

guarantee that people’s votes will be counted properly or will not be tampered with. When everyone votes in a corrupt election, the results seem legitimate when, in reality, they are not.

- Sometimes people are afraid to vote and should not be forced to do so. For nearly 50 years after they had the constitutional right to vote in the United States, many African Americans were intimidated or harassed when they tried to vote.
- There are easier ways to increase voting. Democracies should better educate potential voters about the issues and the candidates’ plans. Then, people will know what is “at stake” and why they should bother to vote. In the state of Maryland, where voter turnout in the September 2010 primary election was described as “dismal,” the state legislature called for new voter registration and education programs. Voluntary voting promotes thoughtful voting.
- Voluntary voting inspires people to take personal responsibility for their democracy. Compulsory voting does not.

### Step 3: Present Arguments

Committee members who read the arguments in favor should now present and explain those arguments to the rest of the group.

Everyone should listen carefully, ask questions, and take notes.

Next, committee members who read the *arguments opposed* should present and explain those arguments. Again, listen carefully, ask question, and take notes.

### Step 4: Individuals Decide

Now that your committee has a better understanding about the arguments on both sides of the issue, discuss the following:

- What were the strongest arguments in favor?
- What were the strongest arguments opposed?

Take two minutes for each person in your committee to write one sentence that answers the question and provides an evidence-based argument:

Would compulsory voting in the United States improve equality?

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Each committee member should now share his/her sentence with the group.

### Step 5: The Committee Decides

Just as you thought your committee was ready to make a decision, Congress has handed you a list of policies to consider.

In your group, consider and discuss these three policy choices:

- A. The United States should not impose compulsory voting. Voting should continue to be voluntary to maintain equality achieved in the past.
  
- B. The United States should impose compulsory voting, perhaps through a constitutional amendment or federal law (otherwise it would be a state-by-state decision). To ensure that voters are informed, however, only those citizens who pass a basic citizenship test will be permitted to vote.
  
- C. The United States should impose compulsory voting. To ensure that uninterested voters do not vote randomly, however, a choice of “none of the above” (NOTA) will be included in any list of candidates. If a majority votes for NOTA, a new nomination and election process will commence.

Which, if any, of these policy options (A–C) do you think would improve equality of voting rights in the United States? Explain your group’s decision. If your group decides that none of these policy options would improve equality, then explain why.

### **Representative #1**

You have been a member of the United States House of Representatives for several years. You are known for being outspoken about human rights. You represent a district with high rates of poverty and a diverse population of new immigrants.

In a recent local election, there was a scandal about voter fraud. A friend of yours ran for state senate and won, but the losing candidate said that many people in the community you represent voted illegally. After an investigation, no evidence was found of wrongdoing.

Given who you are and who you represent, what do you think about the compulsory voting bill?

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### **Representative #2**

You represent a district where about half of the population is affluent, a quarter of the population is “middle class”, and a quarter of the population is poor. You were recently elected in a close race, but only about half of the people in your district voted. If more people would have gone out to vote, you likely would have lost the election.

Even though the more affluent people in your district financed your campaign, you care deeply about helping the less fortunate in your district. You have a tough job because the needs and wants of the people you represent are sometimes conflicting.

Given who you are and who you represent, what do you think about the compulsory voting bill?

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### **Representative #3**

You have been a member of Congress for many years. You are well-known as a civil rights activist, particularly focusing on the rights of African Americans and more recently, Latinos. You have close ties to the families of Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, and believe that the United States has more work to do to ensure equal opportunities for all Americans.

You have the respect of many in Congress, but there is a group of Representatives who think you are corrupt because you have taken campaign money from a company that hires very few minorities. Your position continues to be that it doesn't matter who helps fund your campaigns. It only matters that the people elect you by casting their individual votes at the polls.

Given who you are and who you represent, what do you think about the compulsory voting bill?

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### **Representative #4**

You represent a district that others in your state often call “America’s Heartland.” There is a small town and many farms and ranches in your district. Your district has an unusually high voting rate and people are generally pleased with the way things are going.

In many of the other congressional districts in your state people are not as content. Other Representatives from your state are dealing with angry constituents at town hall meetings and there are protests all the time in your state’s capital city about a high unemployment rate due to a large factory moving out of state.

You are glad that things in your district run smoothly compared to others in the state and don't want to “rock the boat” by supporting or opposing anything that might displease your constituents.

Given who you are and who you represent, what do you think about the compulsory voting bill?