

# SUPPRESSING THE BLACK VOTE



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have Black people been deprived of their right to vote? How has this harmed our country?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify groups of people who have been extended and denied the right to vote in United States history.
- Explain how voting policies have been unfairly applied based on race in the U.S.
- Describe how policy and intimidation worked together to disenfranchise Black citizens.
- Examine a primary source document—a literacy test from the 1960s—to gain a deeper understanding of voter suppression tactics.



## LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



## TIME NEEDED

45 minutes



## MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video
- *Voting Rights* handout (one per student)
- *Alabama Voter Literacy Test (c. 1965)—Sample Questions* handout (one per student)



## VOCABULARY

amendment  
intimidation

policy  
suffrage

suppress/suppression

# Procedures

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**1** Comment that the right to vote is one of the most basic and important rights in the United States, a right that has not always been available to all. On the board, write the headings “1789” and “Today.” In small groups, ask students to estimate what percentage of the population of the U.S. was eligible to vote in 1789 and what percentage is eligible today. Invite groups to record their responses under each heading. Reveal the correct answers: approximately six percent in 1789 and 71 percent today.<sup>1</sup> Discuss the following questions with students:

- What surprises you about these statistics?
- What groups do you think were left out in 1789? Why do you think they were excluded?
- What events in our country’s history led to the expansion of voting rights?

**2** Distribute the *Voting Rights* handout to students and review the instructions. Show TED-Ed’s *The Fight for the Right to Vote in the United States* [4:30]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9VdyPbbzll>. Pause the video to highlight important points and allow students to take notes. Following the video, give students time to complete the “WHO COULD NOT VOTE?” column on the handout in small groups. Review student responses and answer any questions they may have.

**3** Point out this fact from the video: In 1892, after the 15th Amendment extended voting rights, six percent of Black men in Mississippi were registered; in 1960, that number decreased to one percent. Ask students what policies (plans of action) were put into place—even after the law had changed—to suppress voter registration. (The video highlights poll taxes, literacy tests, and voter intimidation.)

## NOTE

In 1789, only property-owning or tax-paying white males could vote. Today, all U.S. citizens age 18 or older can vote, though some states limit the voting rights of people with criminal convictions.

## NOTE

The video states that felons cannot vote, but this varies by state. For information on your state’s policy, see *Felon Voting Rights* at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>.

<sup>1</sup> TED-Ed, “The fight for the right to vote in the United States,” November 5, 2013, video, 4:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9VdyPbbzll>.

## NOTE

A copy of the original literacy test is available at <https://www.crmvet.org/info/litques.pdf>. It can be projected as you review answers so students can view the primary source.

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Tell students that they will take a literacy test given to Black citizens in Alabama in the 1960s. Inform them that they will have eight minutes to work independently on the test, that it will be graded and that three or more wrong answers will be considered a failing grade. Distribute the handout, *Alabama Voter Literacy Test (c. 1965)—Sample Questions*, and have students begin. After eight minutes, have them stop work and allow them to grade their own tests using the answer key below. Ask students to raise their hands if they passed the test.

### Answer Key: Alabama Voter Literacy Test (c. 1965)—Sample Questions

1 Collection of income taxes	6 Senate	11 Vice president
2 True	7 A duty	12 No
3 No	8 Two	13 Naturalization
4 United States	9 12 noon	14 True
5 Two	10 Ten	15 The president

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Show the following clip from the 2015 film *Selma* [1:05], which depicts a woman attempting to register to vote in Alabama in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YRUUFYeOPI>. Discuss some of the following questions:

- Based on the test you took, what percentage of our class would have been eligible to vote in the 1960s South? What is your reaction to the built-in unfairness of the test and the process?
- How did it make you feel to take the test, even knowing the stakes were low? How must it have felt to Black people in that era, for whom the stakes were high?
- In the video clip, what did you notice about the body language and tone of the administrator? What did his charge that she was “making a fuss” reveal about his world view?
- What did you notice about the body language and tone of the Black woman? What might have been the consequences for Black people who stood up to authority figures during that era?

# Discussion Questions

- 1 What is the power in being able to vote? How does it harm our country when some groups are denied that power?
- 2 What groups have been denied the right to vote in U.S. history? Why and how was this done?
- 3 If the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1870) provided voting rights for Black men and the 19th Amendment (1920) gave voting rights to women, what policies and practices prevented them from voting?
- 4 What is the women's suffrage movement? How were Black women doubly challenged in winning the right to vote?
- 5 How are the votes of Black people and other groups still suppressed in the U.S. today? Why do you think voter suppression is still a problem in the 21st century?
- 6 The video noted that today only 60% of people who can vote do. Why do you think so few people vote?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Civil Rights Movement, "Voting Rights: Are You 'Qualified' to Vote? Take a 'Literacy Test' to Find Out," <https://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm>.
- + Onion, Rebecca. "Take the Impossible 'Literacy' Test Louisiana Gave Black Voters in the 1960s," Slate.com, June 28, 2013, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/06/voting-rights-and-the-supreme-court-the-impossible-literacy-test-louisiana-used-to-give-black-voters.html>.
- + PBS, "Eyes on the Prize: (Part 5) Mississippi—Is This America? (1962–1964)," YouTube video, 55:45, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aP2A6\\_2b6g8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aP2A6_2b6g8).

# Lesson Extensions

- Have students examine the primary source literacy tests and voter applications on the Civil Rights Movement site at <https://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm>. Assign them to write a report, with specific examples, about the ways in which Black citizens were treated unfairly and prevented from exercising their right to vote.
- Read about and discuss with students the problem of voter suppression today, especially the ways in which it impacts people of color and poor people. See, for example, "Teaching the Truth About Voter Suppression" on the Teaching Tolerance website at <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-the-truth-about-voter-suppression>.