

# Addressing Racial Discrimination in Voting Lesson Plan

## Overview

**Topic:** Voting Rights, Electoral Process

**Grade level:** Grades 5 - 8

**Subject Area:** Social Studies, ELA

**Time Required:** 2 - 3 class periods (about 20 minutes per activity plus time to explore ["The Most Powerful and Precious Right": A Voting Rights Photo Book](#))

## Goals

Students understand the importance of protecting the right to vote. They learn how racial discrimination has limited voting rights of African Americans and how the tools of a democracy, such as the judicial system and the First Amendment, have and can be used to protect voting rights.

## Essential Question

Why is the right to vote essential in a democracy and what tools can be used to protect voting rights for all?

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- explain why voting is essential to our democracy.
- analyze archival voter registration data to identify racial inequities in voting.
- describe how court cases can change racial discrimination in voting.
- identify strategies used by civil rights groups to achieve voting rights for African American citizens.
- describe a tool used today to protect voting rights for all.

## Connections to Curriculum Standards

*National History Standards*

Historical Thinking Skills Standard  
2 Historical Comprehension  
3 Historical Analysis and Interpretation

## *National Standards for Civics and Government*

III. How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?

V. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

## *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks*

5T5.7 Describe living conditions for African Americans following the Civil War, during the Jim Crow era, including limited educational and economic opportunities, separate public facilities (e.g., segregated schools and colleges, neighborhoods, sections in buses, trains, restaurants, and movie theaters), the organized perpetuation of White supremacist beliefs and the threat of violence from extra-legal groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Describe the role African American churches, civic organizations, and newspapers played in supporting and unifying African American communities.

5T5.8 Research and analyze one of the people, organizations, events, or legislative acts from the 20th century that contributed to expanding civil rights of African Americans, women, and others in the United States.

## Preparation

### **Prior Knowledge and Skills**

- A democracy means government by the people and that in the United States, eligible voters elect leaders to represent them.
- A basic understanding of racial discrimination, segregation, and the civil rights movement.
- Familiarity with the tools of democracy such as the branches of government, the Constitution--specifically, the First Amendment.
- It's helpful, but not essential to have familiarity with the concept of percentages.

### **Historical Background**

Voting is a cornerstone of representative democracy. However, it was not until 1870, with the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, that the US Constitution provided specific protections for voting rights. Former Confederate states strongly resisted extending the vote to Blacks. In 1890, states and localities began passing legislation that led to voter discrimination. These rules included poll taxes, phony literacy tests, complicated identification procedures, and limited voting registration hours. Along with these obstacles, African Americans were discouraged from voting by economic coercion and the continuing threat of violence.

When President Kennedy began his term, civil rights organizations were engaged in widespread non-violent direct action to end segregation and achieve equal rights, including voting rights. The president and Attorney General Robert Kennedy were concerned about the consequences of actions such as the Freedom Rides, demonstrations, and sit-ins, and believed that working to

extend voting rights to Blacks would be the most effective way to address racial discrimination. Although some civil rights advocates did not agree with limiting the focus, they joined with the administration in these efforts while continuing to use direct action to end segregation.

In the summer of 1961, talks between civil rights leaders and Attorney General Robert Kennedy led to the creation of the Voter Education Project (VEP). Funded by private foundations, the program provided grants to civil rights groups to help coordinate and increase the registration of Black voters in southern states. A key civil rights organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was one of the groups to receive funds. Soon after SNCC Field Secretary Bob Moses initiated a voting registration drive in Mississippi, Black voters were beaten and a SNCC field worker, Herbert Lee, was killed. In 1963, SNCC, then led by John Lewis, launched a voting drive in Selma, Alabama. After Lewis was arrested and jailed, high school students volunteered to organize voters to register en masse, though most were turned away.

Meanwhile, as head of the Department of Justice, Robert Kennedy used key tools of democracy, the justice department of the executive branch, and the judicial system, to rectify illegal racial inequities in voting rights. He directed Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall, head of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, to use the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 to aggressively file legal cases against counties who were disenfranchising African Americans. Lawyers for the division traveled to southern counties to comb through thousands of voting registration records, enlist both Black and White witnesses, and investigate harassment and violence against Black citizens. Charts such as the one included in this lesson were used as evidence in these cases.

In the fall of 1963, high school students working with SNCC organized hundreds of African Americans to register to vote on October 7th an action called “Freedom Monday.” The document in the lesson plan shows how Julian Bond, SNCC’s communications director, wrote a telegram to President Kennedy to “urgently request federal marshals for Freedom Monday.” According to a SNCC newsletter from the time, 450 Black citizens lined up in front of the courthouse. Sheriff Clark, referred to in the document, called in 150 state troopers and Clark’s “Posse” of 300 local White residents to intimidate the crowd. Fourteen Black citizens were able to register that day. The article reports that Clark prevented anyone from speaking to the crowd, and two SNCC field secretaries who tried to distribute sandwiches were beaten and arrested.

Civil rights organizations continued to take great risks as they organized key efforts such as Freedom Summer in 1964 and the march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. Their achievements and the extensive legal work of the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division laid the groundwork for the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965.

In 2013, the US Supreme Court, ruling in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder*, nullified a crucial section of the Voting Rights Act in a controversial 5 - 4 decision. The majority asserted that the formula in that section of the law, which applied to certain states and localities where patterns of voter discrimination were evident in the 1960s, was no longer relevant—a view strongly contested by the four dissenting justices. The Brennan Center, a nonpartisan law and policy institute, reports that since 2010, twenty-five states have instituted voting restrictions including

ID requirements and making early voting and registration more restrictive. To make it safe for as many voters as possible during the Covid-19 pandemic, many states expanded mail-in voting and extended early voting opportunities. Other states instituted restrictions that disproportionately impact communities of color, making it more difficult for people to exercise their right to vote.

## Materials

- [Document](#): *Voting Registration in DeSoto County, Mississippi, 1890 – 1962*
- [Document](#): *Telegram from Julian Bond to President Kennedy, October 6, 1963*
- [Artifact](#): *One Man, One Vote SNCC button*
- ["The Most Powerful and Precious Right": A Voting Rights Photo Book](https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Voting%20Rights%20Photo%20Book.pdf)  
(<https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Voting%20Rights%20Photo%20Book.pdf>)

In this lesson, students examine primary source material to consider how citizens and government officials used the tools of democracy to challenge racial discrimination in voting. After this historical investigation, students research current strategies to protect voting rights and identify actions they can take to ensure this most basic of rights.

**Teaching note about the word “Negro” to share with students:** Language is important and changes over time. Until about 1967, “Negro” was one of the acceptable words used by Americans of all races to identify Black or African-American people. When John F. Kennedy was president, the word “Negro” was not thought of as a negative word by most people. However, in the late 60s, some Black leaders and thinkers criticized the word and believed it was important for Americans of African descent to choose their own way to describe themselves. They preferred the word “Black” and then “Afro-American.” Now we use “Black,” “African-American,” or “a person of color” to describe Americans of African descent.

## Procedure

For online learning, use digital documents and share your screen with students.

### Part I: Examining Voting Registration Records from Department of Justice

1. Show students the image of the “One Man, One Vote” SNCC button and use the suggested questions below to launch the lesson:
  - What is the meaning of “One Man, One Vote”? (*Every citizen who is of voting age has the right to vote. The voting age when Kennedy was president was 21; now it is 18.*)
  - Why is it important for each person to have the right to vote? What happens if you are not allowed to vote? (*We vote to elect leaders who represent our values, priorities, and the policies we believe best meet the needs of the people. If someone is denied the right to vote, they lose the ability to participate in the political process.*)
  - Why do you think this button was produced? Why did people wear it? (*Student opinions*)

- How would distributing and wearing the button reflect “freedom of speech”, an important tool of democracy? (*The button expresses an opinion. People are allowed to express their opinions in a democracy.*)
- Explain that SNCC stands for Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the button dates from the early 1960s. When John Lewis, chair of SNCC from 1963 - 1966, learned that people in South Africa used the slogan “One Man One Vote,” he adopted it for SNCC’s voter registration campaign. Is the message still relevant today? (*Many people are concerned that voting restrictions passed in the last 10 years are negatively impacting people of color. Include a discussion about the language on the button and discuss whether the language would be different today –it most likely would have “one person” instead of “one man”.*)
- Explain that they will be reading a *Voting Rights Photo Book* to learn more about the purpose of the button and its connection to voting rights today. Explain that the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum is an archives; it has millions of pages of documents, including evidence about voting rights history. They will be reading a digital photo book with many documents and photographs from the JFK Library and other archives to learn about racial discrimination in voting and how citizens and government officials used the tools of democracy to expand and protect voting rights.
- After reading the *Voting Rights Photo Book*, explain that students will examine historical evidence to learn how, during the Kennedy presidency, the tools of democracy were used to protect voting rights for all, including Black citizens who were being prevented from voting.

2. Show students the De Soto County Mississippi voting registration chart.

- What dates can you find on the document? (*Dates on the left side of the chart*)
- What do you think “reg’d” stands for? (*registered*) What is your evidence? (*The word registration appears at the top of the page.*)
- What does it mean to be registered to vote? (*The person is eligible to vote and has signed up to vote. You have to be registered before you can vote.*)
- What does “Whites Over 21” mean? (*White citizens who are over age 21.*) “Negroes over 21”? (*Black citizens who are over age 21*) Why is the number 21 used? (*That was the voting age at the time.*)
- What do you notice about the number of “Whites” who are registered compared to the number of “Negroes”? (*It is a much higher number. There are thousands more Whites than Negroes who are registered.*)
- What does this evidence reveal about the number of African Americans who were voting? (*There are hardly any African Americans who were able to vote because they are not registered.*)
- Why do you think the numbers are so different? (*Brainstorm ideas.*)
- How can we gather more information about that? (*Research.*)
- What questions do you have about this document or the information in it?

Explain that this chart was created by the Department of Justice. Lawyers in the Civil Rights Division filed cases against counties that were discriminating against Black citizens. The chart was used as evidence in a 1964 court case against the state of Mississippi to show racial

discrimination in voting. The Department of Justice during the Kennedy Administration collected evidence to prove that African Americans, then called Negroes, were being prevented from voting. The Department of Justice used courts, or the judicial system, to show that African Americans were being denied one of the most basic rights in a democracy, the right to vote, because of the color of their skin.

- How would this chart be used as evidence for a court case on racial discrimination in voting?
- What other evidence would lawyers in the Department of Justice need to prove that African Americans were being denied the right to vote?
- How can winning a court case protect the right to vote? (*It can prove racial discrimination which is illegal. There would be consequences for counties and states that restrict people's right to vote.*)

## Part II: A Request for Federal Protection for African American Voter Registration

1. Explain that students will be analyzing a document from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum archives to learn how citizens challenged racial discrimination in voting. Ask students to identify the document. Is it a letter, a telegram, or a journal entry? (*Telegram: The Kennedy Presidential Library has thousands of telegrams. Before email and texting, people used telegrams to send messages quickly over a long distance. The sender paid for a message to be sent over electric wires which was then printed or written at the destination. Since the sender paid by the word, and speed was of the essence, text was not always sent in full sentences and messages rarely had punctuation.*)
2. Read the text aloud and work together to punctuate the message. See below:

(The stamp at the top of the document shows it was received at the White House on October 7, 1963 at 10:05 AM)

*WA017 NL PD*

*Atlanta Georgia Oct 6*

*The President*

*The White House*

*Urgently request federal marshals in Selma, Alabama for Freedom Monday Oct 7. We expect large crowds of Negroes at the courthouse to register to vote. It is reported that Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark plans to make arrests. The rights to vote must be protected by the federal government.*

*Julian Bond, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.*

3. Read the document aloud again. Provide explanations for terms that are unfamiliar to students.
4. Use these suggested questions to analyze the document:
  - On what date was the document sent? (*October 6, 1963*) On what date was it received? (*October 7, 1963*)
  - To whom was it written? (*President Kennedy*) From whom was it sent? (*Julian Bond*) From where was it sent? (*Atlanta, Georgia*)
  - What is the purpose of the document? (*Julian Bond is writing to President Kennedy to request protection for African Americans who are going to register to vote in Selma, Alabama.*)
  - What potential obstacle to voting does the document describe? (*The people who are registering to vote might be arrested.*)
  - According to the telegram, who should protect the right to vote? (*The federal government*)
  - Why would Sheriff Jim Clark arrest African American citizens for registering to vote? (*He does not want them to vote. He is trying to deny Black people from making their voice heard in the election.*)
  - Why do you think “large crowds” were expected to register if they were going to be arrested? (*People organized large groups to try to make change. There might be safety in numbers. This was part of a movement to try to change racial discrimination in voting.*)
  - What tools of democracy did the organizers and participants use to try to attain voting rights? (*freedom to peacefully assemble, freedom of speech, the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment*)
  - What questions do students have? What more do they need to know?

For homework, have students research one of the people, places, or words that is unfamiliar to them and then prepare a 2-5 minute explanation of the topic to the class. Encourage students to use images to help explain their word. Possible choices for the assignment:

**Places:** Selma, Alabama or Dallas County, Alabama

**People:** Julian Bond, Sheriff Jim Clark

**Unfamiliar words:** Freedom Monday, federal government, federal marshals

## Assessment

Review the tools that government officials and citizens used to address racial discrimination in voting: court cases (the registration data chart), freedom of speech (the button and telegram), freedom to peacefully assemble (the telegram), the 15th amendment. Explain that students will be researching voting today to discover if these same tools (and others) are being used to ensure voting rights for all. Present the following topics:

- Voter ID laws
- Early voting restrictions
- Absentee and mail-in voting restrictions

- Closing polls in cities
- Voter registration restrictions
- Laws restricting felons from voting

Have students work individually or in groups to research current laws regarding one of the topics. They can create a poster, podcast, or slideshow that should include:

1. A definition of the topic
2. How it impacts voters
3. Different opinions about the policy
4. Explanation of why the policy should be changed or why it is important to keep it
5. Tools people are using to challenge the policy or maintain it

## Extension

Have students choose one of the topics and take an action as recommended in the presentations.

## Additional Resources:

### ***1963: The Struggle for Civil Rights***

“The Right to Vote in Mississippi” is one of seven sections in this extensive interactive from the JFK Library. An introductory essay, documents, photographs, and film footage show the voting registration efforts of Bob Moses and SNCC workers, the violent backlash, and the response of the Kennedy Administration.

### ***Voting Rights in the Kennedy Years***

A video and transcript of a *Kennedy Library Forum* held on November 10, 2010 features two lawyers who worked in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice in the Kennedy Administration and how they built legal cases to dismantle entrenched racial discrimination in voting in several southern states. Includes archival film footage at 25:50 – 34:25 that shows obstacles faced by two young African Americans who try to vote.

### ***Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall’s Map of Voter Discrimination Cases***

This map, now housed in the JFK Presidential Library and Museum archives, was used by Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to track voter discrimination cases filed by the Department of Justice. The pins on the map are color-coded by type of violation. For more about the map, visit the JFK Library Archives Blog, “*When It Was So Rough That You Couldn’t Make It*”: *Voting Rights in the Early 1960s*.

### ***SNCC Digital Gateway***

Organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) collaborated with historians, archivists, and students to create this documentary website that tells the role of the organization in civil rights history.





[https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/2020-10/NMAAHC-2012\\_159\\_2\\_001.jpg?itok=68EMsxmg](https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/2020-10/NMAAHC-2012_159_2_001.jpg?itok=68EMsxmg)



DE SOTO #3

Date Current Registration Began:

|               | Whites<br>Over 21 | Whites<br>Reg'd | %   | Negroes<br>Over 21 | Negroes<br>Reg'd | %    |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----|--------------------|------------------|------|
| Jan. 1, 1890  | 1,640             |                 |     | 3,547              |                  |      |
| Jan. 1, 1899  | 1,935             | 1,909           | 99% | 4,001              | 212              | 5.3% |
| Jan. 1, 1954  | 4,775             | 2,732           | 57% | 8,013              | 13               | .16% |
| Mar. 24, 1955 | 4,775             | 3,210           | 67% | 8,013              | 13               | .16% |
| Jan. 1, 1960  | 5,338             | 3,545           | 66% | 6,246              | 10               | .16% |
| June 1, 1962  | 5,338             | 4,030           | 75% | 6,246              | 11               | .18% |

TOTAL VOTES CAST IN FIRST GUBERNATORIAL PRIMARY

|             |       |             |              |
|-------------|-------|-------------|--------------|
| <u>1951</u> | 3,187 | <u>1959</u> | 3,555        |
| <u>1955</u> | 3,223 | <u>1963</u> | (incomplete) |

SOURCE AND EXPLANATION OF REGISTRATION STATISTICS

Race Identification

The current registration books indicate race of all electors through March, 1955.

January 1, 1954

Negro: 13

Source: Current Registration Book

Explanation: All Negroes registered prior to January 1, 1954 were counted. Of a total of 19 counted, thirteen were 80 years old or less as of January 1, 1954. Since there is no indication of systematic or accurate elimination from the registration

The White House  
Washington

WA017 NL PD

1963 OCT 7 AM 10 06

ATLANTA GA OCT 6

THE PRESIDENT

THE WHITE HOUSE

URGENTLY REQUEST FEDERAL MARSHALS IN SELMA ALABAMA FOR FREEDOM  
MONDAY OCT 7 WE EXPECT LARGE CROWDS OF NEGROES AT THE COURT  
HOUSE TO REGISTER TO VOTE IT IS REPORTED THAT DALLAS COUNTY  
SHERIFF JIM CLARK PLANS TO MAKE ARRESTS THE RIGHTS TO VOTE MUST  
BE PROTECTED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

JULIAN BOND STUDENT NON VIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE.

[https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHCSF/0368/JFKWHCSF-0368-006?image\\_identifier=JFKWHCSF-0368-006-p0045](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHCSF/0368/JFKWHCSF-0368-006?image_identifier=JFKWHCSF-0368-006-p0045)