

Lesson 7: Expanding Democracy

Essential Question

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

Guiding Question

What does it mean to be equal? Is equality essential for democracy?

Learning Objectives

- Students will see that the success of a democracy is dependent upon its definition of citizenship, how opportunities to participate in civic life are granted and protected, and how citizens choose to participate in its civic life.
- Students will understand that democracy can be understood as an aspiration that nations strive toward. At the same time, nations can successfully become more democratic without fully achieving the goals of equality and justice.

About This Lesson

In the previous lesson, students examined the laws and amendments that were signal achievements of the Reconstruction era. While doing so, they reflected on the ways that nations determine who belongs and express who is included in their universe of obligation. In this lesson, students will explore the consequences of the laws passed as part of Radical Reconstruction, and they will reflect on how the revolutionary changes that occurred because of these laws in the late 1860s and early 1870s affected the strength of American democracy.

Additional Context and Background

The “unprecedented experiment in interracial democracy”¹ that resulted from the policies of Radical Reconstruction is a story largely unknown to many Americans. The laws passed by the Republican Congress in the late 1860s constituted a momentous expansion of civil and political rights in the United States, and they were followed by an

¹ Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 108.

equally unparalleled increase in civic participation and social transformation. Millions of freedpeople, as well as thousands of Black Americans in the North, were no longer prohibited from voting in the United States, and they were eager for their voices to be heard. Historian Eric Foner writes:

Never before in history had so large a group of emancipated slaves suddenly achieved political and civil rights. And the coming of black suffrage in the South in 1867 inspired a sense of millennial possibility second only to emancipation itself. Former slaves now stood on equal footing with whites, declared a speaker at a mass meeting in Savannah; before them lay “a field, too vast for contemplation.”²

It is important for students to understand the unparalleled nature of the expansion of political and civil rights in the United States under Radical Reconstruction and the impact this expansion had on life in the South, where the majority of African Americans lived at the time. Although it didn't last, for reasons that future lessons will explore, this period of interracial democracy is considered by historians to be one of the successes of the Reconstruction era.

A Revolution in African American Political Participation

Once Radical Reconstruction policies were enacted in 1866 and 1867, Black Southerners joined civic organizations, such as Union Leagues, en masse. Meeting in schools and churches, Union Leagues educated freedpeople on the workings of politics and government. They instructed them on the responsibilities of jury duty and offered advice on entering into contracts. The leagues also organized rallies and parades in support of local, state, and national political issues.³

These civic groups provided a foundation from which African American political leaders at all levels of government would emerge. Historians believe that the number of Black officeholders in federal, state, and local governments during Reconstruction peaked at about 2,000. This was a dramatic change in the life and government of the South, only a decade removed from the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, and this number of Black officeholders was unmatched until after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. According to Eric

² Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 129.

³ Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 130–31.

Foner, "It is safe to say that nowhere do black officials as a group exercise the political power they enjoyed in at least some Southern states during Reconstruction."⁴ Sixteen African Americans were elected to Congress, and several dozen more were appointed to federal government posts. More than 600 were elected to Southern legislatures, and hundreds more served in local government positions such as justice of the peace, registrar, city councillor, and county commissioner.

A Coalition of Outsiders

Despite the unprecedented influence of Black voters and elected officials during Reconstruction, it is also important to note that African Americans never constituted a majority in the Republican Party, only one African American held the governorship of a state, and in only one state (South Carolina between 1872 and 1876) did African Americans hold a majority in either house of a state legislature.⁵ Nevertheless, the Republican Party supported the rights of African Americans by controlling state and local governments across the South under Radical Reconstruction. Black votes, while essential, were not solely responsible for the Republican Party's ascendance; the party needed support from white Republicans to cement an effective political coalition. Historian Steven Hahn describes the coalition that transformed Southern politics:

[D]uring Radical Reconstruction there was a shift away from the former slaveholding elite toward a collection of groups who had been outsiders to the formal arenas of southern politics. They included white northerners who had served in the U.S. Army and Freedmen's Bureau, had taken up planting or merchandising, or had been engaged in teaching and missionary work; white southerners who had been Unionists or unenthusiastic Confederates, had been nonslaveholders and small slaveholders, or had lived beyond the immediate orbit of the planter class; black northerners, some having escaped from slavery, who had acquired education and skills, had joined the Union military effort, or had served as ministers and missionaries . . . ; and black southerners who either had been free before the Civil War or had gained their freedom as a result of it. Together, they were substantially less wealthy, less experienced politically, and less committed to perpetuating the old plantation order. And

⁴ Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction*, revised ed. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), xxxi.

⁵ Ibid.

together, they usually owed their positions to black slaves.⁶

Thus the policies of Radical Reconstruction led to Southern state governments in which white and Black men alike voted and held elective office. This transformation, spurred on by the codification of the idea of *equality* in both law and the Constitution, prompted Americans of every gender, race, ethnicity, and class to begin to assert themselves as equal members of American society.

Notes to the Teacher

1. Assigning Reading: Heterogeneous or Leveled Groupings of Students

In this lesson, students will use the [jigsaw](#) strategy to examine documents that explore the consequences of the laws passed as part of Radical Reconstruction. The sources vary in length and reading level, so you might consider in advance how you will group students for this activity. One option is to create heterogeneous groupings of readers so that the stronger readers can assist struggling ones with pacing, vocabulary, and comprehension. Alternatively, you might group students by level and work more closely with struggling readers to target specific literacy skills while allowing the more confident readers to tackle the content independently.

2. Featured Teaching Strategy

The following teaching strategy is referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with it before teaching this lesson.

- [Think, Pair, Share](#)

Materials

- **Reading:** Black Officeholders in the South
- **Image:** [The First South Carolina Legislature After the 1867 Reconstruction Acts](#)
- **Reading:** The Honoured Representative of Four Millions of Colored People
- **Reading:** Reconstructing Mississippi
- **Reading:** Improving Education in South Carolina

⁶ Steven Hahn, "A Society Turned Bottomside Up," in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 405–06.

Activities

1. Reflect on the Dramatic Changes Brought by Reconstruction

Before beginning the lesson, ask students to reflect on the revolutionary and unprecedented nature of granting political and civil rights to millions of people who two years prior were enslaved. Ask students to write a short response to the following quotation by historian Eric Foner, which you can project or write on the board:

Never before in history had so large a group of emancipated slaves suddenly achieved political and civil rights. And the coming of black suffrage in the South in 1867 inspired a sense of millennial possibility second only to emancipation itself. Former slaves now stood on equal footing with whites, declared a speaker at a mass meeting in Savannah; before them lay “a field, too vast for contemplation.”

In their responses, students might reflect on what effects they think granting citizenship and the ability to vote to Black men will have on the lives of individual freedpeople, the South, and the nation as a whole. After students have spent a few minutes recording their thoughts, use the [Think, Pair, Share](#) teaching strategy to help them discuss their ideas about these questions with each other.

2. Evaluating the Effects of Radical Reconstruction

Tell students that they will now be examining the effect that the expansion of citizenship and voting rights had on democracy in the United States.

Break the class into groups of 3–4 students. Explain to students that they will be looking at documents related to the impact of the Reconstruction laws and amendments they learned about in the previous lesson. Share the following prompt with students: *In the last lesson, you learned about several laws and amendments passed by Republicans in Congress during Reconstruction, including the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Reconstruction Acts of 1867. What impact did these laws have?*

Explain to students that in their small groups, they should underline evidence from their assigned document(s) that helps them to answer the above question. Have each group explore the following documents:

- Group 1: **Black Officeholders in the South** and [The First South Carolina Legislature after the 1867 Reconstruction Acts](#)
- Group 2: **The Honoured Representative of Four Millions of Colored People**
- Group 3: **Reconstructing Mississippi**
- Group 4: **Improving Education in South Carolina**

After each group has read and underlined their assigned document, have groups report their findings to the class. Each group should share a summary of their document, how they would answer the prompt based on what they read, and 2–3 pieces of evidence that support their argument.

3. Reflect on the Impact of Radical Reconstruction on the Health of Democracy in the United States

After each group has shared, give each student a notecard. Have each student write a newspaper headline at the top of the card that captures how the Radical Reconstruction laws and amendments affected the health of democracy in the United States. Explain that a good headline usually summarizes an idea or event in 12 words or less. Alternatively, you might have students compose a Tweet (which is 140 characters or less).

Below their headlines, have students list three pieces of evidence they recorded from the documents and statistics that support or explain their headline. Ask students to share their headlines with a partner in a [Think, Pair, Share](#).