STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Voting Rights in the United States

What Barriers to Voting Do Americans Face and Why Does It Matter?
This Teaching Idea contains the following activities, which can help you think about the history of voting rights in the United States and questions around voting rights today:

**Activity 1:** Explore the history of voting rights

**Activity 2:** Introduce the Voting Rights Act and *Shelby County v. Holder*

**Activity 3:** Examine challenges to voting in 2018

**Activity 4:** Learn about voting today
**Activity 1: Explore the History of Voting Rights**

**Reflect:** Do you think voting is important? Why or why not?

Then, watch the TED-Ed video [The fight for the Right to Vote in the United States](https://www.ted.com/talks/the_fight_for_the_right_to_vote_in_the_united_states?language=en) (4:30), which provides a brief history of US voting rights.

**Reflect:**

- Which groups of US citizens have been—or still are—denied the right to vote? Why were these citizens denied their right to vote?
- When and why has the United States expanded voting rights in the past?
Activity 2: Introduce the Voting Rights Act and *Shelby County v. Holder*


**Reflect:**

- What was the purpose of the 1965 Voting Rights Act?
- What aspect of the Voting Rights Act did Shelby County challenge?
Read the “Question” and “Conclusion” sections of the case summary of Shelby County v. Holder.

You will be assigned to a group of four, and each group member should adopt one of the following roles:

- **Shelby County representative** (the Alabama county claiming the VRA is unconstitutional)
- **Eric Holder, Jr.**, the former Attorney General for President Obama (defending the constitutionality of the Voting Rights Act)
- **Chief Justice John Roberts** (writing for the narrow majority of the Court and siding with Shelby County)
- **Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg** (writing for the minority of the Court and disagreeing with the ruling)
Discuss the following questions with your group. You should respond from the viewpoint of your assigned role.

- Why was the Voting Rights Act necessary in 1965?
- Which districts were considered “eligible districts” under the Voting Rights Act and why?
- Why did Shelby County challenge the Voting Rights Act in 2013?
- What was the Court’s opinion?
- Why do you think four justices dissented?
- What do you think has been the impact of Shelby County v. Holder?
Activity 3: Examine Challenges to Voting in 2018

After *Shelby County v. Holder* overturned key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, a number of states have passed new restrictions on voting and have made accessing the ballot box more difficult for many. Georgia is one state that has enacted several new voting restrictions.
Activity 3: Examine Challenges to Voting in 2018


Reflect:

- What types of laws can make voting more difficult?
- How can voting laws impact different groups of people differently?
Activity 3: Examine Challenges to Voting in 2018

Read and discuss the Brennan Center report *What’s the Matter with Georgia?* using the Jigsaw strategy.

With your “expert” group, read **one section** of the Brennan Center report. Summarize your section with your group.

Then, move to your “teaching” group. Present your summary of your section of the report to your group and listen to your group members’ summaries of the other sections.
Look at the Brennan Center interactive map New Voting Restrictions in America.

Use the S-I-T strategy to think about what you see. After looking at the map, identify the following:

- One Surprising fact or idea
- One Interesting fact or idea
- One Troubling fact or idea
**Reflect:** How do you think voting will be different this year because of the pandemic?
Activity 4: Learn about Voting Today


Reflect:

● **Connect:** How do the ideas and information in this section of the video connect to what you already brainstormed about voting this year?

● **Extend:** How does this video extend or broaden your thinking about voting this year?

● **Challenge:** Does this reading challenge or complicate your understanding of voting? What new questions does it raise for you?
Voter profiles:

- **Voter 1**: This person just turned 18 and is hoping to vote for the first time. They still need to register to vote before the election.
- **Voter 2**: This person is elderly and lives alone. They have voted during every election in person, but they are nervous about being around other people because of the coronavirus.
- **Voter 3**: This person works long shifts at a hospital. They want to vote in person, but may have to work on election day.
- **Voter 4**: This person does not have a photo ID and has been moving around between friends and relatives since the pandemic began, so they don’t have a stable mailing address.
Activity 4: Learn about Voting Today

Use the *Washington Post* tool [How to Vote in Your State](#) to look up voting procedures in your state. Answer the following questions from the perspective of you voter and then to present your findings to the class:

- Do you think your voter would be more likely to vote by mail or in person? Why?
- What are all of the steps your voter needs to take in order to vote?
- What are the obstacles your voter might face when voting?