



citizens. not spectators.
promoting youth civic and political engagement.



Center for Civic Education

Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 1: Who Can Vote in the United States?

Teacher Resource 1: Quick Vocabulary

absentee ballot An election ballot in a mail-in format, for a voter who cannot be present at the polls.

abstain To refuse to exercise the right to vote.

amendment A change to the U.S. Constitution or the constitution of a state. Voters must approve any changes to a constitution.

apolitical To remain unconcerned with politics. Polling places must be “apolitical” sites: no discussion or materials pertaining to politics or the ballot are allowed. This includes buttons, banners, and posters that display a political position on a candidate or ballot question.

citizen Any person who is a member of a nation.

democracy A form of government in which power is held by the people. The people exercise their power either directly or through elected representatives.

direct democracy A form of government in which the people themselves meet and make the laws that they decide are needed.

felony A crime, such as murder, considered more serious than a misdemeanor and subject to more stringent punishment.

grandfather clause A law that stated that a person could vote if his grandfather had been allowed to vote. It made it possible for white people to vote even if they could not pass a literacy test because their grandfathers had the right to vote. It also made it impossible for African Americans to vote because their grandfathers had not been allowed to vote.

independent voter A person who registers to vote with no political party affiliation. The decision to register as an independent voter does not register a voter with any third party,

although these third parties are often referred to as independent parties. In some states, voters registered as independent cannot participate in primary elections.

initiative A proposed law that voters in some states can place on the ballot. If the initiative is passed, it becomes a law or constitutional amendment.

literacy test A test given to people to prove they are able to read and write. These tests were used in the South to keep African Americans from voting.

majority More than half.

majority rule A principle of democracy that the greater number of citizens in any political unit should select officials and determine policies. Majority rule is one of the most important principles of democracy, but is not always practiced in societies that value consensus.

mentally incompetent Unable to make decisions about one's own daily activities. If a court finds that a person is mentally incompetent, this usually means that the person is not allowed to vote.

minority rights The principle in a constitutional democracy that government elected by a majority must respect the basic right of minorities.

parole Temporary release of a prisoner for a special purpose, or a complete release before completion of a full prison sentence.

poll tax A tax that voters in many states had to pay before they could vote.

referendum A measure approved by a legislative body and placed on a ballot for approval by voters. Referendums approved by the voters become law.

register To officially sign up as a qualified voter.

suffrage The right to vote.

Voting Rights Act of 1965 An act of Congress that protected the right to vote for all U.S. citizens. It forced the states to obey the U.S. Constitution. It made it clear that the right to vote could not be denied because of a person's color or race.