

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: The Alabama Constitution of 1901 Unit

This lesson was created by educators working with the Alabama Department of Archives as part of the “[Using Primary Sources in the Classroom](#)” project in 1996.

Lesson 5: Voting After the Constitution of 1901

Background information for teachers:

The Constitution of 1901 included a host of new voting requirements to restrict suffrage to "the intelligent and the virtuous voter." The new requirements were designed to take away the vote of African Americans without running afoul of the 15th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited denying the right to vote on the basis of race.

Residency and literacy requirements along with poll tax and property qualifications were included, as was a provision that voters be engaged in a lawful business. Poor whites who might have been disqualified by these restrictions could be "grandfathered" in for life if they or their ancestors had served in the military or if they were of "good character" and "understood the duties of citizenship." The new Constitution effectively disfranchised nearly all black Alabamians and dramatically reduced the numbers of white voters as well.

Content Standards:

Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies (2010)

- 4th Grade
 - 10. Analyze social and educational changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for their impact on Alabama.
 - Examples: social—implementation of the *Plessey versus Ferguson* “separate but not equal” court decision, birth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
educational—establishment of normal schools and land- grant colleges such as Huntsville Normal School (Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical [A&M] University), Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama (Auburn University), Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (Tuskegee University), Lincoln Normal School (Alabama State University)
 - Explaining the development and changing role of industry, trade, and agriculture in Alabama during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the rise of Populism
 - Explaining the Jim Crow laws
 - Identifying Alabamians who made contributions in the fields of science, education, the arts, politics, and business during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- 7th Grade Civics:
 - 5. Compare duties and functions of members of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of Alabama’s local and state governments and of the national government.

- Locating political and geographic districts of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of Alabama’s local and state governments and of the national government
 - Describing the organization and jurisdiction of courts at the local, state, and national levels within the judicial system of the United States
 - Explaining concepts of separation of powers and checks and balances among the three branches of state and national governments
- 10th Grade:
 - 15. Compare congressional and presidential reconstruction plans, including African-American political participation.
 - Explaining the impact of the Jim Crow laws and Plessey versus Ferguson on the social and political structure of the New South after Reconstruction
 - Analyzing political and social motives that shaped the Constitution of Alabama of 1901 to determine their long-term effect on politics and economics in Alabama
- 12th Grade Government
 - 5. Compare specific functions, organizations, and purposes of local and state governments, including implementing fiscal and monetary policies, ensuring personal security, and regulating transportation.
 - Analyzing the Constitution of Alabama of 1901 to determine its impact on local funding and campaign funding
 - Describing the influence of special interest groups on state government

National Standards for History

- Era 5 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)
 - Standard 3: How various reconstruction plans succeeded or failed
- Era 7 The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)
 - Standard 1: How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Standard 2 – Time, Continuity, and Change
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy
- Standard 5 – Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions
- Standard 6 – Power, Authority, and Governance
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

- Standard 10 – Civic Ideals and Practices
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Define the terms "suffrage" and "poll tax."
2. Discuss the limitations of suffrage as written in the 1901 constitution.
3. Compare and contrast voting qualifications and rights from the Jim Crow era and those of the present.

Suggested Activities:

1. Make a copy of [Document 1](#).
2. Ask the students to use the [general suggestions for analyzing a written document](#).
3. Ask the students to guess why J. G. Crommelin, Jr. was given a certificate of registration for life.
4. Make a copy of the [Synopsis of Voting Requirements](#).
5. After reading the voting requirements, ask the students which of the provisions might have been met by J. G. Crommelin, Jr.
6. Ask the students to list those people who could NOT vote under the provisions of the new constitution.
7. Make a copy of [Document 2](#) and [Document 3](#).
8. Allow the students to compare the numbers of white and black voters who had to pay the poll tax in each document.
9. Allow the students to compare and contrast the numbers of white and black voters from the Perry County, Radfordville precinct in 1892 (Document 2) and in 1902 (Document 3). What can be gathered from this data?
10. Using reference materials, ask the students to find out the qualifications for voting in the present time.
11. Ask the students to make a list of similarities and differences between voting rights of the present time and those of 1901.

Primary Sources:

[Document 1](#): "Life certificate of registration," Crommelin Family Papers, LPR62, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 2](#): "List of Registered Voters, Radsfordville Precinct, Perry County, 1892," LG5494 folder 2, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 3](#): "Poll List, Radsfordville Precinct, Perry County, 1902," LG2313, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

Synopsis of Voting Requirements from the Constitution of 1901:

The applicant must:

1. Have resided in Alabama for two years, his county for one year and his ward for three months;
2. Have paid a poll tax of \$1.50, retroactive to 1901 or to the year when voting age was reached on or before February 1 in the election year;
3. Own real or personal property worth \$300 or more or forty acres of land on which the taxes had been paid; (The assets of the wife could be used for the voter, if necessary.)
4. Be able to read and write any article in the constitution in English to the satisfaction of the registrars;
5. Have been engaged in a lawful business for the previous year;
6. Have been free of conviction of crime.

Additionally, until January of 1903, a man who met the age, residence and poll tax requirements could register to vote for life provided that he had been in the army or navy in previous wars. This provision was also extended to those who were descendants of sailors or soldiers. Also, the vote was extended to those men who exhibited good character and understood the duties of citizenship.

Source:

William Warren Rogers, Robert David Ward, Leah Rawls Atkins and Wayne Flynt, Alabama: The History of a Deep South State (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), p. 347.

General Suggestions for Analyzing a Written Document

1. Describe the document. Is this a letter, a will, a bill of sale or some other kind of document?
2. What is the date of the document? Is there more than one date? Why?
3. Who is the author of the document? Is this person of historical significance? Do you believe that the author of this document is credible? Is this document written as a requirement of the author's occupation or is this a personal document?
4. For what audience was this document written?
5. List or underline three (3) points that the author made that you believe are important.
6. Why do you think that the author wrote this document? Use quotes from the document to support your position.
7. List two (2) things from the document that describes life in the United States or in Alabama.
8. Write one (1) question to the author that is unanswered by the document.