



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #15: Expanding Voting Rights

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds upon the previous lesson examining ways citizens participate in government today. In Lesson 14, students learned that jury service is an important form of political participation because it allows ordinary citizens to participate directly in government while helping protect constitutional rights. In Lesson 15, students examine how voting rights expanded over time through constitutional amendments and legislation. This lesson focuses on the continuing effort to make the democratic process more inclusive by extending voting rights to more citizens.

The focus of this lesson is to help students understand that voting rights have expanded throughout United States history through constitutional amendments and legislation. Students examine how the Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth Amendments, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, removed barriers to voting and expanded participation in the democratic process. Through the story of Amelia Boynton Robinson, students also learn how individual citizens helped bring about important changes that strengthened voting rights.

Students learn that:

- Citizens participate in government today in many different ways.
- The Constitution did not originally guarantee voting rights for all citizens.
- Voting rights expanded over time through constitutional amendments and legislation.
- The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited denying the right to vote based on race.
- The Nineteenth Amendment extended voting rights to women.
- The Twenty-fourth Amendment eliminated poll taxes in federal elections.
- The Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to 18.
- The Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped enforce constitutional protections and remove barriers that prevented many citizens from voting.
- James Wilson believed that government should receive its authority from the people, a principle reflected in the continued expansion of voting rights throughout American history.

This lesson is organized into two phases. Phase 1 builds meaning through vocabulary, reading, and text coding. Phase 2 builds argument through gathering evidence and using it to engage in discussion and

writing. The lesson culminates in a structured Revolutionary Writers essay centered on the constitutional amendment or law that students believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights, supported by evidence from the reading, biography, and video.

Competition Note: For teachers participating in the FIREWORKS250 year 2 cohort, this essay is one of nine potential essays students may select for the Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition. Each lesson introduces a key Founding Father or revolutionary while integrating civics standards. Teachers will introduce these individuals to students with a biography and video before students write their essay.

Materials

- Highlighters or pencils for text coding
- Handout #1: How the U.S. Constitution Expanded Voting Rights
- Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer
- Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer
- Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Note: Students may use any notes from any handout (text coding, video notes, or graphic organizer) when writing their essay. These are not separate tasks but support tools for the final essay.

Preparation

- Number paragraphs in the reading text.
- Review vocabulary: Suffrage, Amendment, Poll tax, Voting Rights Act, Political participation
- Before class, locate and read the biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum for James Wilson: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- Load the James Wilson video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaK-9PgYVR4>.
- Prepare the essay writing model. See sample paragraphs in the Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to previous lessons examining forms of political participation during the colonial period.

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.2.3** Analyze how the U.S. Constitution expanded civic participation over time. *Clarification:* Students will describe how the U.S. Constitution expanded voting rights through amendments and legislation including, but not limited to, the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Essential Question

How has the U.S. Constitution expanded voting rights over time?

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students examine how voting rights expanded over time through constitutional amendments and legislation, with an emphasis on understanding how barriers to voting were removed so that more citizens could participate in the democratic process.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** "Who can vote in the United States today?" Accept all reasonable responses. Record responses where all students can see them.
- **Quick pair share:** Students briefly discuss. Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions later during the lesson.
 - Who can vote in the United States today? (possible responses below)
 - * U.S. citizens
 - * Adults age 18 and older
 - * People who meet their state's voting requirements
 - * Most adults
 - Has everyone always had the right to vote? Why or why not? (possible responses below)
 - * No
 - * Some people were not allowed to vote in the past
 - * Laws changed over time
 - * More people gained the right to vote
 - Today we'll examine how the Constitution and later laws expanded voting rights over time. What do you already know about voting rights in American history? (possible responses below)
 - * More people can vote today than in the past
 - * The Constitution has been amended
 - * Some laws changed who could vote
 - * People worked to expand voting rights

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- **Introduce and clarify the following terms:**
 - **Suffrage:** The right to vote.
 - **Amendment:** A formal change or addition to the Constitution.
 - **Poll Tax:** A tax that some states required people to pay before they could vote.
 - **Voting Rights Act:** A federal law passed in 1965 that helped protect voting rights and remove barriers to voting.
 - **Political Participation:** Actions citizens take to help govern or improve their community.
- **Teacher prompts:**
 - "What does the word suffrage mean?"
 - "Why might the Constitution need to be amended?"
 - "How could a poll tax prevent someone from voting?"
 - "Why do you think voting rights expanded over time?"

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “As you read, use the text codes to identify important ideas in the article. Some sections may receive more than one code. For example, a paragraph might describe a barrier to voting, explain a constitutional amendment, and show how voting rights expanded.”
- Students read: How the U.S. Constitution Expanded Voting Rights (Handout #1)
- **Students use four codes to mark sections:**
 - AL (Amendment or Law): Describes a constitutional amendment or law that expanded or protected voting rights.
 - B (Barrier to Voting): Describes a law, practice, or condition that prevented or limited people from voting.
 - E (Expanded Voting Rights): Describes how voting rights were expanded or protected over time.
 - I (Important Information): Important background or context that does not clearly fit AL, B, or E.

Note: The “I” code is intentionally open. Students who disagree about coding are engaging in strong historical thinking. Use discussion prompts such as: “Why did you choose I instead of E?” “Could this paragraph fit more than one code?” “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- **Think aloud:**
 - “This section explains a constitutional amendment that expanded voting rights. I would code that AL.”
 - “This paragraph describes a law that protected voting rights. I would also code that AL.”
 - “This section describes a barrier that prevented some citizens from voting. I would code that B.”
 - “This paragraph explains how voting rights expanded over time. I would code that E.”
 - “This paragraph provides important historical background, but it doesn't clearly fit one of the other categories. I would code it I.”
 - Model uncertainty and evidence-based reasoning. Not every paragraph fits neatly into one category. Encourage students to explain and defend their thinking.

Guided Practice—We Do (5 minutes)

- **Read the next paragraph together.** Celebrate productive disagreement. There is no single correct answer for every paragraph.
 - “What is this section mostly explaining?”
 - “Is this describing an amendment or law, a barrier to voting, expanded voting rights, or important background information?”
 - “Could more than one answer make sense?”
 - “What evidence supports your thinking?”
 - Celebrate productive disagreement.

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What amendment or law is described in this section?”
 - “What barrier to voting is described?”
 - “How did this amendment or law expand or protect voting rights?”
 - “What evidence supports your code?”
 - “Could more than one code apply? Why?”

Phase 2: Build Argument (Synthesis → Evidence → Writing)

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain how the U.S. Constitution expanded voting rights over time, with an emphasis on constitutional amendments and laws that removed barriers to voting and increased political participation.

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you review the text today, pay attention to how voting rights expanded over time. Notice how the author explains barriers to voting and the amendments and laws that helped more citizens participate in elections.”

Directed Note-Taking (15–20 minutes, Handout #3)

Guiding Question:

Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you are gathering evidence to help answer this question: Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights? As you review the text, think carefully about the evidence the author provides for each amendment and law.”
Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this evidence shows
Fifteenth Amendment		
Nineteenth Amendment		
Twenty-fourth Amendment		
Twenty-sixth Amendment		
Voting Rights Act		

- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Which amendment or law contains the strongest evidence?”
 - “Which amendment or law provides the strongest evidence that voting rights expanded?”
 - “Why do you think the author devoted so much attention to these amendments and the Voting Rights Act?”
 - “Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights? Explain your reasoning using evidence from the text.”

Meet a Founding Father: James Wilson (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “In today's text, we learned that when the U.S. Constitution was written, voting rights were limited, and the states decided who could vote. Over time, constitutional amendments and important laws expanded voting rights so that more Americans could participate in the political process. Now we are going to meet James Wilson, one of America's Founding Fathers, who believed that government receives its authority from the people. He played a critical role in giving the people the power to vote (called popular sovereignty), choosing one main leader, the president, to run the country, and using a special group of voters to help choose the president (known as the Electoral College). As you listen and watch, think about how James Wilson's ideas connect to expanding voting rights and increasing participation in self-government.”
- **Read** the James Wilson biography aloud to the class from:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles/>
- **Show** the James Wilson video to the class from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaK-9PgYVR4>

Note: The biography and video introduce students to James Wilson and his belief that government derives its authority from the consent of the people. The text remains the primary source for understanding how the U.S. Constitution expanded voting rights over time.

- *Students complete Handout #4 while watching.*
- *Teacher prompts (after video and biography):*
 - “Why did James Wilson believe government should receive its authority from the people?”
 - “How do James Wilson's ideas connect to the expansion of voting rights over time?”
 - “How did James Wilson help shape the Constitution?”
 - “Why is voting an important way for citizens to participate in self-government?”

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?”
- **Students discuss:**
 - Fifteenth Amendment
 - Nineteenth Amendment
 - Twenty-fourth Amendment
 - Twenty-sixth Amendment
 - Voting Rights Act
- **Teacher prompt (after students talk):** “Today’s text showed how constitutional amendments and laws expanded voting rights over time. James Wilson believed that government receives its authority from the people. Based on what you’ve read and learned, which amendment or law do you think did the most to make that idea a reality?” Let this synthesis emerge from student responses rather than leading with it. Remind students that there may be more than one reasonable answer. Encourage them to support their position with evidence from the reading and video.

Debate: Which Amendment or Law Resulted in the Greatest Expansion of Voting Rights? (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display the debate question and the position statements:

The Debate Question

Which amendment or law resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

Position statements:

- Position A: The 15th Amendment resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it guaranteed that citizens could not be denied the right to vote because of race.
- Position B: The 19th Amendment resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it guaranteed women the right to vote nationwide.
- Position C: The 24th Amendment resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it removed the poll tax.
- Position D: The 26th Amendment resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it lowered the voting age to 18.
- Position E: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it removed barriers that continued to prevent many citizens from voting.

Note: The Directed Note-Taking categories provide evidence students may use to support either position.

Debate Directions

Choose the amendment or law you believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights. Explain why you believe it best reflects the author's message. Support your position with evidence from the text, the James Wilson biography, or the video.

Structured Discussion

- Call on students who chose different amendments or laws. *Prompts include:*
 - “What evidence supports your position?”
 - “Does another group disagree?”
 - “Could more than one amendment or law have significantly expanded voting rights? Why or why not?”
 - “How do James Wilson's ideas about the consent of the governed connect to expanding voting rights?”
 - There is no single correct answer. The goal is for students to use evidence to defend a position—exactly the thinking the essay requires. Teachers may shorten discussion or combine steps depending on class time.

Bridge to Essay

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you learned how constitutional amendments and important laws expanded voting rights over time. You evaluated evidence about the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments, as well as the Voting Rights Act, and argued which one resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights. James Wilson believed that lawful government is founded on the consent of the governed. Now your essay asks you to explain which amendment or law you believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights. Use evidence from today's text, biography, and video to support your position.”

Primary Assessment Task (20–25 minutes, Handout #2)

Revolutionary Writers Essay: James Wilson and the Expansion of Voting Rights

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 15 and also serves as one of nine potential student essays for the FIREWORKS250 Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition for students with teachers participating in cohort 2. Participating teachers should save all student essays. Students will select their best essay at the end of the year to submit for the competition.

- *Teacher prompt:* “You have learned how constitutional amendments and important laws expanded voting rights over time. Today's reading explained how the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments, along with the Voting Rights Act, helped more Americans participate in the political process. James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, believed that lawful government is founded on the consent of the governed. Which amendment or law do you believe

resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights? Explain your answer using evidence from the text, biography, and video. Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, believed that lawful government is founded on the consent of the governed. Which amendment or law do you believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

Students should write a paragraph that:

- states which amendment or law they believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights.
- explains why they chose that amendment or law.
- uses evidence from the text, biography, and video.
- explains how the amendment or law expanded voting rights.

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

James Wilson believed...

I believe the _____ Amendment (or Voting Rights Act) resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because...

One reason is...

The text explains...

The biography or video explains...

This evidence supports my thinking because...

Sample paragraphs:

Sample Paragraph 1: The 19th Amendment: *I believe the 19th Amendment resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights. One reason is that it gave women in every state the right to vote. Before the amendment, women fought for more than 70 years to gain this right. The text explains that leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked for many years to achieve equal voting rights. The 19th Amendment expanded democracy by allowing millions of women to participate in elections. I think it resulted in one of the greatest expansions of voting rights because it gave a voice to half of the nation's population.*

Sample Paragraph 2: The Voting Rights Act: *I believe the Voting Rights Act of 1965 resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights. Even after the 15th Amendment, many states continued using literacy tests, intimidation, and other unfair methods to prevent Black Americans from voting. The text explains that the Voting Rights Act banned these barriers and helped millions of people register and vote. Amelia Boynton Robinson's work and the Selma marches also helped convince Congress to pass the law. I believe the Voting Rights Act resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because it turned the promises of the Constitution into real opportunities for citizens to vote.*

Closure (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* "Today we learned that the U.S. Constitution expanded voting rights over time through constitutional amendments and important laws. We focused on how the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments, along with the Voting Rights Act, helped more Americans participate in our democracy."
- *Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:* "Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights? Why?"
- *Exit Ticket prompt:* "Which amendment or law expanded voting rights, and how did it help more Americans participate in democracy?"

Handout #1

How the U.S. Constitution Expanded Voting Rights

When the U.S. Constitution was written in 1787, it did not say who could vote. That was left up to the states to decide. At first, most states only allowed white men who owned property or paid taxes to vote. Suffrage, or the right to vote, was usually denied to women, Black Americans, Native Americans, and many poor people who did not own property. Over time, Americans worked to extend the democratic process and make voting rights more inclusive. Through amendments (changes to the Constitution) and important laws, voting rights were expanded to include more Americans. This made America live up to the Founders' ideal of a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Here are the key ways voting rights expanded.

The 15th Amendment (1870): Voting Rights for Black Men

After the Civil War (1861–1865) and the end of slavery, millions of Black Americans became free citizens. Yet, many states still prevented Black men from voting by using unfair methods, such as charging a poll tax (a fee people had to pay just to vote), requiring difficult literacy tests, or using threats of violence to scare people away from the polls.

The 15th Amendment said: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This amendment guaranteed Black men the right to vote by making it illegal for any state to deny the vote because of race. It was a huge step toward equality, but some states still found ways to block Black voters for many years. Still, the 15th Amendment was a powerful promise that race could not be used to stop voting.

The 19th Amendment (1920): Voting Rights for Women

For more than 100 years, women could not vote in most states. Women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth led marches, speeches, and protests for more than 70 years. They argued that if "all men are created equal," then women should have the same rights.

Susan B. Anthony was one of the most important leaders in this movement. She was arrested in 1872 for trying to vote in a presidential election. During her trial, the judge told the jury to find her guilty without letting them decide, and she was fined \$100 (which she refused to pay). Anthony used her trial to speak out, saying: "It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens... who formed the Union." Her courage and determination helped build support for women's voting rights.

In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified. It said: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” This amendment gave women in every state the right to vote. It was a victory for fairness and equality, and women have voted in every election since 1920.

The 24th Amendment (1964): Ending the Poll Tax

Even after the 15th and 19th Amendments, some states charged a poll tax—a fee people had to pay to vote. This made it very hard for poor people, especially Black Americans and poor white people, to vote.

The 24th Amendment banned poll taxes in federal elections. It said: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.” Later, the Supreme Court ruled that poll taxes were unfair in state and local elections too. This made voting possible for millions of poor citizens who couldn’t afford the fee.

The 26th Amendment (1971): Voting Rights for 18-Year-Olds

During the Vietnam War (1955–1975), many young men were drafted (forced to serve in the military) at age 18. They could fight and die for their country, but they couldn’t vote until age 21. People said: “Old enough to fight, old enough to vote!” Students and young people protested and marched. Congress listened, and the 26th Amendment was passed very quickly. It said: “The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.” Now, if you’re 18 or older, you can vote in every election. This amendment gave millions of young people a voice in their government.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965: Making the Promises Real

Even with the amendments, some states still used unfair methods (like difficult literacy tests and intimidation) to stop Black Americans and other minorities from voting. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. This important law:

- Banned literacy tests and poll taxes in many places
- Sent federal workers to register voters in areas with a history of discrimination
- Made sure states could not change voting rules in unfair ways

The Voting Rights Act turned the words of the amendments into real action. It helped millions of Black Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and others finally vote without fear or unfair barriers.

Amelia Boynton Robinson was one of the most important Black American leaders in the fight for the Voting Rights Act. Born in Georgia in 1911, she moved to Selma, Alabama, where she became a teacher and civil rights activist. For decades, she worked to register Black voters, even when it was dangerous. She was beaten and arrested many times for trying to help people vote.

In 1965, Boynton helped organize the Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights. On March 7, 1965—known as Bloody Sunday—she was part of the peaceful march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. State troopers attacked the marchers with clubs and tear gas. Amelia Boynton was beaten unconscious and gassed. A famous photograph shows her lying on the bridge, being carried away by fellow marchers. This image shocked the nation and helped convince Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act just months later. President Johnson invited her to the signing ceremony as a special guest. Amelia Boynton Robinson lived to be 104 and continued fighting for equality her whole life. Her courage showed how one person's bravery can help change laws for millions.

Why These Changes Matter

By expanding voting rights, America brought more people into the democratic process. At first, only a small group of white men could vote. Today, almost every citizen 18 and older can vote, no matter their race, gender, or how much money they have. These amendments and the Voting Rights Act show that the Constitution can be improved when people work together to make it better. Voting is one of the most powerful ways to participate in our democracy. The changes made by the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th Amendments, plus the Voting Rights Act, remind us that America keeps working to include more voices. When you're old enough, your vote will help make our country even better!

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, believed that lawful government is founded on the consent of the governed. Which amendment or law do you believe resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

Remember: Use what you learned about voting rights and James Wilson from the text, biography, and video.

Step 1: Choose Your Position

Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

- ☐ Fifteenth Amendment
- ☐ Nineteenth Amendment
- ☐ Twenty-fourth Amendment
- ☐ Twenty-sixth Amendment
- ☐ Voting Rights Act of 1965

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

Which amendment or law did you choose?

I chose _____

What is one reason for your choice? _____

What is a second reason for your choice? _____

How did the reading about expanding voting rights influence your decision?

My decision was influenced by _____

How did James Wilson's ideas from the biography or video influence your thinking?

My decision was influenced by _____

Why do you think your choice is the best one?

I think that my choice is the best one because _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Evidence from the biography or video:

Step 4: Write Your Essay

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph.

Sentence Starters (optional)

James Wilson believed...

I believe the _____ resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights because...

One reason is...

Another reason is...

The text, biography, or video explains...

This evidence supports my thinking because...

Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Guiding Question:

Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. Find evidence for each amendment or law. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this evidence shows
Fifteenth Amendment		
Nineteenth Amendment		
Twenty-fourth Amendment		
Twenty-sixth Amendment		
Voting Rights Act		

Think About It:

Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights?
Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Video: James Wilson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaK-9PgYVR4>

Directions: Your teacher will read the biography of James Wilson and show a short video about his life. As you listen and watch, think about why James Wilson believed government should receive its authority from the people. Record important ideas from the biography and video. Then answer the questions below.

James Wilson

1. How did James Wilson help shape the government of the United States?

2. Why did James Wilson believe government should receive its authority from the people?

3. What do you think James Wilson meant when he said that lawful government is founded on the consent of the governed?

4. How do constitutional amendments and laws help more citizens participate in government?

Make the Connection

5. How do James Wilson's ideas connect to what you learned about expanding voting rights in today's reading?

6. Which amendment or law do you think resulted in the greatest expansion of voting rights? Explain your thinking.
