



Amendment Regarding Suffrage, 1901

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can people use words and education to resist oppression?

Standards

Social Studies

(6-8) I.1.3, I.1.4; (9-12) I.1.3

8.C&G.1, 8.C&G.1.1, 8.C&G.1.2, 8.C&G.1.3, 8.C&G.1.5

AH.C&G.1; AH.C&G.1.1, AH.C&G.1.2, AH.C&G.1.3, AH.C&G.1.4, AH.C&G.2.2

8.H.1, 8.H.1.3, 8.H.1.4

AH.H.1.1, AH.H.3.1

English Language Arts

RI.6-12.1, RI.6-12.2, RI.6-12.3, RI.6-12.4, RI.6-10.5, RI.6-12.6, RI.11-12.8, RI.6-12.9

RI.6-12.10

SL.6-12.1, SL.6-12.3

L.6-12.1, L.6-12.4, L.6-12.6

Standards for Extension Options

(6-8) I.1.6, I.1.7, I.1.8, I.1.10, (9-12) I.1.5

8.B.1.1, 8.B.1.2, AH.B.1.6

AH.C&G.1.4; AH.H.3.2

W.6-12.1, W.6-12.2, W.6-12.3, W.6-12.5

L.6-12.2, L.6-8.3

Objectives

- Analyze the literacy test requirement and its effect on African Americans in the early 1900s.
- Assess the effectiveness of two forms of resistance (White's and Harris') to the suppression of voting rights.

Lesson Contents

The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution became law in 1870, declaring that all men could vote, regardless of race. Once the Democratic Party regained control of the legislature, it passed laws to suppress Black men's right to vote. At the local level, bribery, intimidation, and fraud also suppressed African American voting. Hope grew for Black voters when the Populist Party emerged from farmers' organizations and formed an alliance with the Republican Party, termed "Fusionism." In 1894 this alliance won majorities in the General Assembly and the state supreme court and two years later elected Governor Daniel Russell of Brunswick County. Some in the Democratic Party reacted with terrorist tactics and violence, and by 1898 Democrats had regained control of government.

The Suffrage Amendment of 1901 required voters to pay poll taxes and pass a literacy tests. The way the amendment was written made it seem like it applied to all races equally and complied with the 15th Amendment. However, Democratic legislators acknowledged the amendment's purpose to disenfranchise African Americans. During this time, nearly 30% of White people were illiterate. But the amendment included a "grandfather clause," allowing men to vote if their ancestors had voted before 1867. This meant illiterate White voters could usually avoid the literacy tests. When Black men tried to vote, White officials often chose the hardest passages of the constitution for them to read and write. The effect of the amendment on elections statewide was severe. By 1902, Black voter turnout was low and did not improve until the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Primary Sources

Amendment to the state constitution, 1901, Article VI, "Suffrage and Eligibility to Office," digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/amendment-of-the-north-carolina-constitution-regarding-suffrage/789530

George H. White, "Defense of the Negro Race—Charges Answered," speech before the U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., January 29, 1901, docsouth.unc.edu/nc/whitegh/whitegh.html

G. Ellis Harris, *North Carolina Constitutional Reader, Being a Handbook for Primary Use in One Part* (Raleigh: St. Augustine's Printing Office, 1903), cover- p. 9, digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/north-carolina-constitutional-reader-being-a-hand-book-for-primary-use-in-one-part/412651

Folder Contents

- **Background: 1901 Amendment Regarding Suffrage**
- **Background: 1901 George H. White's Address to Congress**
- **Selections & Questions: George H. White's Address to Congress**
- **Background: 1903 *North Carolina Constitutional Reader***
- **Activity: Literacy Tests**
- **Exit Tickets**

Lesson Preparation

- Review the primary sources, transcription, related materials, and slides to determine which options are appropriate for your students. Note that this box contains a variety of options from which teachers can select, based on available time, learning goals, and student capacities.
- Access original documents to project for the class and zoom in as needed. These may be found via online links or as files on the accompanying flash drive.
- Keep answer keys at hand for any handouts you choose.
- Vocabulary terms for this lesson may be posted or projected to discuss as a class. If you prefer to distribute an individual handout, print copies of the appropriate page in the **Glossary** in the **Cross-Lesson Activities** folder or modify the word list to create a quiz or other activity.
- Make copies of any handouts you choose.
 - **Document Analysis** sheet (found in the **Cross-Lesson Activities** folder) is an optional assignment for work with any of the primary sources. Print double-sided, 1 copy for each student.
 - **Background: 1901 Amendment Regarding Suffrage** can be printed double-sided. Note: slides can substitute for background worksheets and may be more appropriate for upper levels. If selecting this worksheet, print 1 copy for each student.

- Plan to project the **1901 Suffrage Amendment** or print it double-sided for individual work.
- If completing **Activity: Constitutional Timeline**, found in the **Cross-Lesson Activities** folder, as individual work, students may already have this sheet from the 1868 Constitution lesson. Otherwise, print page 2 for each student. If discussing as a class, replicate the chart on a large piece of paper to tape to the wall.
- **Background: 1901 George H. White's Address to Congress** can be printed single-sided or double-sided with the **Selections & Questions: George H. White's Address to Congress** for individual work, 1 for each student.
- If covering background information with slides or class discussion, **Selections & Questions: George H. White's Address to Congress** may be printed as single-sided worksheets, 1 for each student.
- **Background: 1903 North Carolina Constitutional Reader** may be printed single-sided to distribute to each student for completion of the reading comprehension questions or double-sided to include **Activity: Literacy Tests**.
- **Activity: Literacy Tests** is intended for pairs of students. If printing instructions, print 15 copies for 30 students. Note that this activity requires students to select both simple and challenging passages of the state constitution. Have pre-printed copies of the 1868 and/or current (1971) constitutions for student reference (find one of each in the DocsBox) or pre-select several sections of each—some easy and some hard—to print and hand out to student pairs.
- If you plan for students to practice cursive writing using instruction pages from the *Constitutional Reader*, refer to pp. 10-11 shown on the **Activity** page or make copies of pages you select and download from the NC digital collection for pairs or small groups.
digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/north-carolina-constitutional-reader-being-a-hand-book-for-primary-use-in-one-part/412651
- **Exit Tickets**—print single-sided and cut, 4 tickets per page (8 copies for 32 students)

Background Knowledge

(5 minutes)

Ask students: *why is the right to vote important? What would you do if you had it and then lost it?* Student answers will vary.

Procedure

- Ask students *why would some people try to stop others from voting?* Answers will vary but include maintaining or reclaiming power. (5 minutes)
- Review the **Glossary** by projecting or distributing the list of terms. Discuss any additional terms that cause students comprehension difficulty during the lesson. (10 minutes)
- Pass out the **Document Analysis** sheet. Allow students to come to their own conclusions after reading the amendment or George H. White's "Defense of the Negro Race" and/or G. Ellis Harris's book introduction. For White's speech, this activity may work best in conjunction with the **Selections & Questions**. (20 minutes)
- Pass out **Background: 1901 Amendment Regarding Suffrage** double-sided sheets and allow students to complete. Review fact-check answers using key. (15 minutes)
- Complete a large wall chart as a class or allow time for students to complete the 1901 section of **Activity: Constitutional Timeline** individually. Ask: *Who is missing?* If continuing to work with the DocsBox for additional lessons, have students keep their completed chart for future review. (10 minutes)
- Pass out **Background: George H. White's Address to Congress** and **Selections & Questions** and allow students to complete. Review answers in class discussion using keys. (20 minutes)
- George White moved away from North Carolina to maintain his right to vote. Ask the class *how would a Black man who stayed in N.C. at that time hope to be able to vote?* Answers will vary but may include a discussion of the importance of education. (10 minutes)
- Pass out **Background: North Carolina Constitutional Reader, 1903** and allow students time to read and complete comprehension questions. Review answers in class discussion using key. (15 minutes)
- Distribute copies of the 1868 or current state constitutions or pre-selected passages to student pairs. Have each student take a turn to select a simple passage and read it and the other write it on notebook paper. If possible or desired, have them try writing in cursive. Then each student should try reading a challenging passage for their partner to write. Follow up with a class discussion encouraging

students to imagine trying to pass such a test when the poll official wants them to fail. (20 minutes)

- If time allows, have students practice writing letters in cursive and quiz each other on Roman numerals, with images in **Activity: Literacy Tests** as a guide, or find more example cursive writing instruction pages in the primary source folder. (10 minutes)
- Pass out **Exit Tickets**. Choose an option or use both if lesson extends multiple days. (5 minutes)
 - *Is there a group today that needs extra encouragement or resources to be able to vote?*
 - *What resources would you supply to help people vote?*

Modifications

- Student pages/worksheets could be shared with students needing to take notes individually, with vision issues, or who have issues focusing (even if the slides are being used collectively).
- Students could be paired with a higher-achieving or differently behaving student for extra support.
- Students could be given extension activities if they finish early or are high-achieving and need more challenging or independent work. These can be done independently or collaboratively.

Extension Options

- Create a North Carolina *Constitutional Reader* for today. What information would you include to help adults exercise their right to vote? What populations would you target for this guidance?
- There is a current senate bill for an amendment to the state constitution to repeal the literacy test, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2025/Bills/Senate/PDF/S14v1.pdf>. Read this article about why the bill has limited support. <https://www.carolinajournal.com/opinion/repealing-ncs-voter-literacy-test-gets-limited-support-but-why/>. Write an argument for passing the bill and/or an argument against it.
- Imagine you are a conservative congressman in 1901 and write a rebuttal to George White's address.

- Imagine George White and G. Ellis Harris are pen pals. Work with a partner to pick a perspective and exchange letters, trying to persuade each other to either stay in N.C. or leave the South. For Harris’s letter, read the Introduction in his book through page 9, found in the **Primary Sources** folder, to understand his perspective.
- Create a political cartoon that depicts a challenge Black Americans faced under the 1901 anti-suffrage amendment. Explain why you chose specific language, imagery, and symbols.
- Analyze the role of newspapers in politics during the 1890s and 1900s. What types of social media most influence politics today? Compare and contrast the effects. Visit digitalnc.org/newspapers/ to research period newspapers and support your argument.

Field Trip Connection

Visit Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum in Sedalia, Guilford County, on the site of the Palmer Memorial Institute, founded in 1902 to advance African American education and economic capacity. historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/charlotte-hawkins-brown-museum

Recommended Resources

George Henry White Center, “American Phoenix,” 14-minute documentary, georgehenrywhite.com/

Carolina K12 lesson plan, 1898 Wilmington Coup, k12database.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2020/07/Wilmington1898Coup.pdf

Henry Frye, who later became the state’s first Black legislator since the Suffrage Amendment in 1969 and later chief justice of the State Supreme Court, failed the literacy test in his hometown in Richmond County in 1956. Find his description of the test here, judges.org/news-and-info/judicial-heroes-legends-march-2021-chief-justice-henry-e-frye/ (Scroll for a 3-minute video, “Judicial Heroes and Legends: Chief Justice Henry E. Frye.”)