How important is the right to vote? For those who do not have it, that right can seem as important as life itself. Indeed, in the Deep South of the 1960s, civil rights workers suffered arrest, beatings, shocks with electric cattle prods, even death—all in the name of the right to vote. Their efforts inspired the nation and led to large-scale federal efforts to secure suffrage for African Americans and other minority groups in the United States.

The Fifteenth Amendment

The effort to extend the franchise to African Americans began with the 15th Amendment, which was ratified in 1870. It declares that the right to vote cannot be denied to any citizen of the United States because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The amendment was plainly intended to ensure that African American men, nearly all of them former slaves and nearly all of them living in the South, could vote.

The 15th Amendment is not self-executing, however. In other words, simply stating a general principle without providing for a means to enforce implementation was not enough to carry out the intention of the amendment. To make it effective, Congress had to act. Yet for almost 90 years the Federal Government paid little attention to voting rights for African Americans.

During that period, African Americans were generally and systematically kept from the polls in much of the South. White supremacists employed a number of tactics to that end. Their major weapon was violence. Other tactics included more subtle threats and social pressures, such as firing an African American man who tried to register or vote, or denying his family credit at local stores.

More formal “legal” devices were used, as well. The most effective were literacy tests. White officials regularly manipulated these tests to disenfranchise African American citizens.

Registration laws served the same end. As written, they applied to all potential voters. In practice, however, they were often administered to keep African Americans from qualifying to vote. Poll taxes, “white primaries,” gerrymandering, and several other devices were also regularly used to disenfranchise African Americans.

Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing electoral district lines (the boundaries of the geographic area from which a candidate is elected to a public office) in order to limit the voting strength of a particular group or party.

The white primary arose out of the decades-long Democratic domination of politics in the South. It was almost a given that the Democratic candidate for an

An African American woman registers to vote.

Lesson Plan

Teaching the Main Ideas

1. Focus Tell students that the 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870 but was not truly effective until 1965. Ask them to discuss what they know about the amendment and the laws that eventually gave it some force.

2. Instruct Ask students how some States used gerrymandering to get around the provisions of the 15th Amendment. Discuss this and other similar tactics and the laws that eventually arose to combat them.

3. Close/Reteach Remind students that the 15th Amendment gave African Americans the right to vote—in theory. Ask students how the Voting Rights Act helped turn that theory into practice.
Having read the passages under The Fifteenth Amendment on pp. 159–160 and then answer the question below.

Why was the 15th Amendment ineffective for decades in ensuring the right of African Americans to vote?

A) Congress did nothing to implement it.
B) Its wording was unclear and confusing.
C) African Americans did not exercise their right to vote.
D) Supreme Court decisions weakened the amendment.
The Civil Rights Act of 1960 added an additional safeguard. It provided for the appointment of federal voting referees. These officers were to serve anywhere a federal court found voter discrimination. They were given the power to help qualified persons to register and vote in federal elections.

**The Civil Rights Act of 1964**
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is much broader and much more effective than either of the two earlier measures. It outlaws discrimination in several areas, especially in job-related matters. With regard to voting rights, its most important section forbids the use of any voter registration or literacy requirement in an unfair or discriminatory manner.

The 1964 law continued a pattern set in the earlier laws. In major part, it relied on judicial action to overcome racial barriers and emphasized the use of federal court orders called injunctions. An **injunction** is a court order that either compels (forces) or restrains (limits) the performance of some act by a private individual or by a public official. The violation of an injunction amounts to contempt of court, a crime punishable by fine and/or imprisonment.

Dramatic events in Selma, Alabama, soon pointed up the shortcomings of this approach. Dr. King mounted a voter registration drive in that city in early 1965. He and his supporters hoped that they could focus national attention on the issue of African American voting rights—and they most certainly did.

Their registration efforts were met with insults and violence by local white civilians, by city and county police, and then by State troopers. Two civil rights workers were murdered, and many were beaten when they attempted a peaceful march to the State capitol. The nation saw much of the drama on television and was shocked. An outraged President Lyndon Johnson urged Congress to pass new and stronger legislation to ensure the voting rights of African Americans. Congress responded quickly.

**The Voting Rights Act of 1965**
The Voting Rights Act of 1965 made the 15th Amendment, at long last, a truly effective part of the Constitution. Unlike its predecessors, this act applied to all elections held anywhere in this country—State and local, as well as federal.

Originally, the Voting Rights Act was to be in effect for a period of five years. Congress has

Background Note

**Common Misconceptions**

Contrary to popular belief, the United States was hardly a world leader in granting women suffrage. By the time the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, fully 15 other countries had already extended voting rights to women. The first of these countries, New Zealand, beat the United States by almost four decades.

**Guided Reading and Review**

Unit 2 booklet, p. 16 provides students with practice identifying the main ideas and key terms of this section. Have students review the section and write ten true-or-false questions about section content. Students should then exchange their questions with a partner and answer them.

**Lesson Planner**

For complete lesson planning suggestions, see the Lesson Planner booklet, section 3.

**Political Cartoons**

See p. 25 of the Political Cartoons booklet for a cartoon relevant to this section.

**Section Support Transparencies**

Transparency 28, Visual Learning; Transparency 127, Political Cartoon

Answers to . . .

Analyzing Time Lines
1. The 15th, 19th, and 26th Amendments
2. The general trend has been toward a more democratic political system, or government by the people.
**Background Note**

**Recent Scholarship**

How did international affairs influence the civil rights movement? This provocative question is examined and answered in University of Southern California law professor Mary Dudziak’s book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Dudziak maintains that the civil rights movement was intricately bound up with the Cold War, and that the relationship between the two was not always forthright. The author argues that while the United States was presenting itself to the world as the model of human rights and democracy, it was simultaneously denying civil rights to a large portion of its population. This hypocritical stance caused a strain in foreign relations, which led politicians to press for some civil rights reforms. The emphasis was on appearance rather than actual change, however, so the pace of reform was slow and uneven. Dudziak’s premise is an interesting one, and sheds new light on both the Cold War and civil rights.

**Point-of-Use Resources**

**Close Up on Primary Sources**


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**Answer to . . .**

**Interpreting Graphs** About 1.7 million new African American voters registered.
a number of counties in six more States (Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, New Mexico, and Oregon) were added to the law’s coverage.

The 1970 law also provided that, for five years, no State could use literacy as the basis for any voting requirement. That temporary ban as well as residence provisions outlined in the law were upheld by the Supreme Court in Oregon v. Mitchell in 1970.

In 1975, the law was extended again, this time for seven years, and the five-year ban on literacy tests was made permanent. Since 1975, no State has been able to apply any sort of literacy qualification to any aspect of the election process.

The law’s voter-examiner and preclearance provisions were also broadened in 1975. Since then they have also covered any State or county where more than 5 percent of the voting-age population belongs to certain “language minorities.” These groups are defined to include all persons of Spanish heritage, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Alaskan Natives.

This addition expanded the law’s coverage to all of Alaska and Texas and to several counties in 24 other States, as well. In these areas, all ballots and other official election materials must be printed both in English and in the language of the minority, or minorities, involved.

The 1982 amendments extended the basic features of the act for another 25 years. In 1992 the law’s language-minority provisions were revised: they now apply to any community that has a minority-language population of 10,000 or more persons.

Over the years, several States and a handful of counties in a few other States have been removed from the law’s coverage, through the “bail-out” process. Today, eight entire States remain subject to the Voting Rights Act: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. At least some counties in six other States are also covered by the statute: California, Florida, New York, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Virginia, and so are two townships in Michigan and ten towns in New Hampshire.

Section 3 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. What is gerrymandering? What other devices were used to disenfranchise African Americans?
2. What part do injunctions play in the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
3. What is preclearance? How can a State “bail out” of the preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
4. (a) Identify the major civil rights laws enacted since 1950. (b) Describe voting rights provisions in these laws.

Critical Thinking

5. Drawing Conclusions Even after the ratification of the 15th Amendment, African Americans in the South were denied the right to vote because the amendment was not implemented. (a) What does that tell you about American attitudes from 1870 until the 1950s? (b) Why did those attitudes change?
6. Possible answers: (a) It meant that Congress was made up of people who did not represent all Americans and in many cases were not sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. (b) It reduced the likelihood of getting civil rights legislation passed.

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
Web Code: mqd-2063

Go Online

Typing in the Web Code when prompted will bring students directly to detailed instructions for this activity.