Activity Introduction

Hi, my name is (NAME) and today we’re going to talk about voting rights and the evolution of voting rights throughout U.S history.

Then we’ll look into how participation from people like you and me can actually further the idea of democracy in all governments.

We’re also gonna check out how debates are used to better inform the public about the issues and the candidates that vie for their support.

Video 1 - Introduction

Throughout U.S. history there have been efforts made to keep certain members of society from the electoral process.

Women, African Americans and the poor have all at one time been denied the right to vote in our nation’s history.

Check out this video to learn more about the legislation that was passed and what wrongs it sought to remedy.
The amendments to the Constitution that deal with voting qualifications were supposed to enfranchise minority voters, women and the poor. But even after the passage of the Twenty Fourth Amendment, outlawing pole taxes in federal elections in 1961, it was clear that some states would do everything in their power to limit voting as much as possible.

At that point, Congress and the federal government stepped in and took over. The purpose of the Fifteenth Amendment was to give newly freed adult black males the right to vote. However, the amendment did not provide for anyway to enforce itself, and so the federal government didn’t do anything to make sure these black males were able to vote. Some states, including many in the South, went to great lengths to keep blacks from voting.

Some of the most common methods were violence and the threat of violence by the Ku Klux Klan and other groups. Retaliation, firing blacks who voted, or denying them credit at local stores. Pole taxes, fees to vote, which were set higher than most blacks could afford. Literacy tests to see if people could read in order to vote. Typically, literacy examiners in the South, who were always white, would ask a white voter to read a paragraph from a first grade reader and say what it meant. A black voter might be asked to read a really difficult part of the state Constitution and explain its meaning. If the explanation did not satisfy the examiner, the person could be turned away at the poles, as most black voters were.

White primaries where important decisions were made about candidates. States claimed that political parties were private associations entitled to set their own membership requirements. The Democratic Party, which dominated the South, denied membership to blacks. This meant that blacks could not vote in the democratic primary and whoever won the democratic primary won the general election. And
gerrymandering, the drawing of electoral district boundaries in a way to favor a particular group. State legislatures in the South became experts at drawing districts, so that even cities with the majority of black residents would end up with white representatives. Congress took the first step towards fairness in elections with the Civil Rights Act of 1957. It set up the Civil Rights Commission, which investigated claims of voter discrimination and reported its findings to Congress, the President and the public. It also gave federal courts the power to prevent interference in a person’s right to vote in a federal election.

A stronger version of the law was passed in 1960. It allowed the government to send voting referees to any area where a federal court found evidence of discrimination in federal elections to help qualified voters to register. Congress updated the Civil Rights Act again in 1964. This law prohibited states from using literacy tests or any sort of registration requirement in a discriminatory way. In 1965, Martin Luther King, Junior led a voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama. This effort was met with violent resistance from white residents, as well as local and state police officers. Much of the violence was broadcast on television, shocking the country, including President Johnson. He got Congress to make a law to protect the voting rights of blacks once and for all.

Nearly 100 years after the Fifteenth Amendment, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 put the force of law behind the meaning of the amendment, the right for blacks to vote. The Voting Rights Act was originally in affect for five years and it said the law applied to all elections, federal, state and local. All pole taxes were to be challenges in federal courts. The Supreme Court ruled all pole, all pole taxes illegal in 1966. In states and counties where blacks were a majority of the population, but voter turn out was low, it was assumed that there had been some discrimination. So if these areas wanted to change their election laws, they had to get pre cleared by the justice department. Any laws or revisions that had the affect of diluting minority voting rights was not allowed.
The law as amended in 2006 extended protections for voting under the law and a permanent ban on literacy tests for another 25 years. Voting rights in the U.S., at long last, seem secure. There are still court challenges mainly regarding gerrymandering and redistricting, but the basic right to vote free from intimidation or ridiculous restrictions is a well established part of the political system. Of course, this right is useless, unless people use it. That is, actually get themselves to the poles and vote.

**Video 1 – Recap**

Some states, including many in the South, went to great lengths to keep minorities from voting.

Although the 15th amendment was passed in 1870, various methods were used to exclude minority voters.

Poll taxes, literacy tests, and the threat of violence were some common practices that kept these voters away from participating in democracy.

As a result, the federal government passed legislation that would address these issues and finally extend the right to vote to minorities, the poor, and women.

**Video 2 - Introduction**

So how have Presidential debates evolved over the years? Watch this video to find out.
Just like in American history, the role of television in the history of presidential debates is huge. Just imagine what it must have been like for the candidates debating to have an audience of millions watching their every move. That’s a lot of pressure!

Video 2

Before the era of television, presidential campaigns in the United States were difficult, time consuming ordeals. Candidates had to travel long distances, often by railroad or automobile. They gave hundreds of speeches and yet, they still managed to reach only a tiny fraction of the electorate or people that could vote. Television changed all that.

With television, candidates can reach millions of voters with a single campaign commercial. Television also provides a way for direct side by side comparison of candidates, the presidential debate. These debates were first used only during the presidential election, but now are used during the primary season as well. During a debate, candidates stand on a stage behind podiums and answer questions from a moderator. The candidates must be prepared to discuss many different topics and cannot use notes. Debates are meant to show candidate’s knowledge and their ability to handle pressure and unexpected situations. The first televised presidential debate was held in 1960. Beginning in 1976, presidential candidates have had two to three debates during each general election. Debates remain important. More people watch the debates than vote.

We’re going to take a look at a brief clip from the very first televised presidential debate. On September 16, 1960, 70 million viewers watched Senator John F. Kennedy debate Vice President Richard Nixon.

“I therefore, do not believe that this is a sharp enough breach for the past to give us any hope of success of the future.” “Mister Nixon, comment.” “I, of course, disagree with Senator Kennedy insofar as his suggestions as
to what should be done, uh, with, on the farm program. He has made the suggestion that what we need is to move in the direction of more government control, a suggestion that would also mean raising prices, uh, that the consumers pay for products and, and imposing upon the farmers, uh, controls on acreage, even far more than they have today. I think this is the wrong direction. I don’t think this has worked in the past. I do not think it will work in the future.”

Obviously, the first thing you probably notice is the low quality of the picture, grainy black and white. Picture quality aside, a few observations jump out. Kennedy looks young and vibrant. He had recently been campaigning in California and was tan and fit going in to the debate. Nixon was recovering from recent knee surgery and looked pale and sickly. He was 20 pounds underweight and wearing a shirt that didn’t fit very well.

Also, he refused to wear any stage make up to hide his persistent 5:00 shadow. Television is mostly visual, and so people watching television respond to images more than to words. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to learn that viewers overwhelmingly thought Kennedy won the debate. However, people who listened to the debate on the radio said that Nixon won.

Presidential debates today are very different from what they were almost 50 years ago or even 10 years ago. The major differences are summarized in this table. Back in the day, there were debates only between the candidates from the two main parties and these happened during general election time. Now, there are debates during the primaries as well, meaning possible candidates from the same party debate each other. Before, candidates were prepped by their close advisors only. Now, the process is much more sophisticated. They have media advisors, stylists, debate coaches, etcetera.
Another major difference is the number of times a debate is shown. Before, it was on TV one time, live and if you wanted to see it again, you had to get it from the library. These days, the debate is on television and the internet, which means it can be seen over and over again on websites.

This is very important, because mistakes, misstatements and embarrassing moments, especially, tend to get repeated endlessly and can create a negative image of the candidate when one might not be deserved. For example, in a vice presidential debate in 1992, Admiral James Stockdale missed a question directed at him, because, as he said, he had his hearing aid turned off. The moment provided a bit of humorous relief in what had been a fairly dull event. If that happened today, a clip of it would be shown over and over again all over the internet, be mass emailed and not be allowed to fade. This would be a shame. James Stockdale was a highly regarded decorated war veteran who would not have deserved ridicule for a harmless mistake.

Presidential debates are a very important part of any election. Voters want to see how their candidate reacts under pressure. However, the increase in technology has made these debates less about what the candidates say and more about the way they say it and how they look.

**Video 2 - Recap**

As the video stated, televised presidential debates have played a key role in U.S. politics in the last 50 years. It’s interesting to note that more people watch these debates than actually vote.
And as you saw, the look and style of presidential debates has evolved through the years, and with technology, debates can now be seen many times and by many more people all across the U.S.

**End of Activity Review**

The right to vote has been extended through the years to more and more groups of citizens in the US.

The 15th Amendment extended voting rights to adult black males in the U.S.

Increasing public participation in government furthers the ideas of democracy.

Advanced technology has allowed for presidential debates to reach millions of voters and help inform them on issues in campaigns.

The first televised debate took place in 1960 between Senator John F. Kennedy & Vice-President Richard Nixon.